Semblance

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Semblance

by sfumatosoup

Summary

Hannibal places his hand over Will's, mirroring him through the barrier.

"If you're ready, then I'm yours."

The earth is still new and the foundation is yet to settle; but it will be sowed and it will bloom.

Will eagerly anticipates the harvest.

Chapter 1

Wolftrap: Familiar. Safe. Home.

Associations Will's mind ascribes to his destination in a desperate loop as the heavy weight of exhaustion bears down on him, threatening to swerve his car off the road into a ditch-- the thought of which creeps up the corners of his mouth into a half-manic grin, because wouldn't that just be his luck.

Flip on the high beams. Punch on the radio. Get from point A to point B. It's all he needs to do.

Roll down the windows, you need air.

"*Shut up,*" Will grumbles to no one in particular, but he still rolls down the windows and the cool air that rushes against his face is revitalizing.

Just what the doctor ordered.

He has to begrudgingly admit that 'no one in particular's' unwelcome, familiar accent does serve a reliable voice of reason when his own goes AWOL and the fact that said voice just so happens to belong to a fucking serial murdering cannibal is an absurdity that is not lost on him.

Will chuckles.

It's a dull, mirthless thing that's mostly lost in the din of wind and Lynyrd Skynyrd. Finally, after miles of stretching fields and trees: mission accomplished.

Will kills the engine, pulls the keys from the ignition and stares out the windshield blankly, blinking tiredly up at his house.

Sparing a glance down at the time, the blurry numbers redundantly remind him how fucking late it is but it doesn't matter. Not anymore. Not like there's anyone waiting up worried, and to be honest it's a fucking relief.

Of course, this is followed quickly by a sharp jab of guilt for feeling good about the fact.

Drained, he summons the last vestiges of willpower from his already depleted reserves, peels himself out of the car and drags himself up the porch steps.

The lonely house stirs the moment his tired hands clumsily fumble the key into the lock and the second he makes it through the door he's met with his very own welcoming party.

On autopilot, he trips his way through a swarm of eager licks, whines and wagging tails, dumps the day's worth of neglected mail onto the counter, makes sure all bowls are filled and takes a very long piss. After which, he strips off the rest of his clothes and casts them

carelessly to the floor. It's a bit spiteful really, and he does it more because he can rather than because he's a slob. No Molly to harp on him.

Naturally, of course, this instantly makes him feel like a piece of shit, and triggers a cruel replay of his final conversation with her last night in the hospital. It was his fault, she accuses without actually saying it.

Instead, she's all forgiveness and understanding, laying blame elsewhere instead of where it's due. She apologizes and explains it's over and she's leaving, but not because of him, because of her son, who must be protected because he's the most important, and they both agree to that, and it's all a damned perfect alibi to cover what they both don't want to say.

This wasn't working.

The attempted attack was a blessing in disguise. A merciful excuse to save face and get out.

They part on good terms, and it's sad, and there is regret, and the paperwork will be in the mail.

Hannibal's sabotage has facilitated both Will's liberty and isolation and this impending isolation is what Will fears the most, what he knows is exactly what Hannibal had most desired and Will has always found Hannibal's desire exhilarating. He expects Hannibal will be anxious to reap the rewards of his latest success as soon as he's able, and although Will can't quite anticipate how it will play out, he's tempted to enable the opportunity.

It occurs to him that it was probably Hannibal's aim. It's exactly what he would want Will to want. He'd groomed him for dependence so that in his absence he'd be lonely-- so that Will would crawl back to him sooner or later.

"I want you to know exactly where I am and where you can always find me."

Only, Hannibal hadn't accounted for rebellion. He should've known better.

Molly entered Will's life like a breath of fresh air at just the right time, offering a refreshing possibility of something good, something wholesome, something he'd always imagined would be denied him. In Molly and Ben there was the chance for redemption and the conditions were straightforward.

He just had to be a good man. Observe. Emulate. Adapt. Survive.

Convince himself of his own authenticity. It's all he needed to do.

And oh the crisp satisfaction he'd anticipated thinking how *desperately* Hannibal would hate her. There would be such indignation; *such scorn.* And underneath it all anger and hurt. He would sit there by himself forced to dwell over it-- how easily Will had replaced and forgotten him.

The perceived injury to Hannibal only further glorified Molly's appeal.

Marrying her? Playing father to her son? This would be the fulfillment of the reckoning he'd promised, and a bitterly executed one at that.

In retrospect, he's pretty certain Hannibal had never agonized over the whole thing the way Will had hoped; he was just biding his time, waiting for the milk to sour itself.

What cuts the deepest is that Will had always known deep down that this thing with Molly had an expiration date.

He's been honest with himself a lot the last few hours, and he knows now, he latched onto the hope this little family symbolized and fed off it like a parasite. It wasn't all artifice though, he genuinely felt some fashion of love for Molly and Ben, though more succinctly, he felt a fondness and affection for them, gratitude for their company and love for him that in turn, naturally inspired his instinct to protect them as an Alpha responding to the needs of his pack.

But as much as he'd always tried to convince himself of their permanence, there was always that insidious whisper; that lingering fear in the back of his mind that this would be fleeting. He was living a fantasy, and he knew it endangered them. Obviously there's always that hovering threat that comes with the territory when you work for law enforcement in some capacity. There are always going to be ghosts, but for Will, there would always be one in particular-- one nursing a persistent obsession for his reluctant ingenue. When met once more with resistance, retaliation came in the form of a convenient proxy.

The Dragon proved a dangerous instrument.

Thankfully, Molly scraped herself and her son out of that. Will doesn't know what he'd do if they hadn't. He doesn't like to think about it.

Anyway, it felt good to tell Hannibal he'd failed.

Though, ironically, Will also feels begrudgingly indebted to the bastard. The very thing he'd feared the most would never be given the time nor opportunity to come to fruition: the emergence of the darkest, blackest part of himself that Will shielded his family from. Granted, until Jack returned, there were few triggers.

It also meant no viable outlets. The violence inside couldn't survive denied, he'd reasoned, deluded with optimism.

Instead it revealed itself through resentment which in turn bred an observational clarity poisoning the beauty of the simple life he'd hoped to build. Molly's heart and mind were open to him and regretfully, he could not encourage himself to thrill in owning either, in many ways she should have been the ideal companion, they had similar ideas, beliefs and interests, but it was like they just had different syncing.

Her body was desirable but he never desired it, their love making temporarily sating but never satisfying. He wanted to cherish her and be grateful, yet still, within him was some inherent flaw that prevented him from becoming the man he wanted to be for her and by extension, the father he wanted to be for Ben.

At the best of times, their life was mediocre and he was content. In more ignoble moments, he silently blamed her for wanting him to be the man he'd promised he was.

In his very darkest moods, he missed Hannibal with an irrepressible ache that gutted him.

Seen through a distorted lens, Hannibal's discreet, remote engineering, resulting in the dismantlement of this very incongruous version of Will was a prescient act of benevolence.

Will's empathic acuity wants to give the bastard this benefit, he wants to believe Hannibal knew his mind well enough to have committed this atrocious act for the right reasons, but in truth, he knows better. Hannibal will have hoped to deceive him into believing this. He may even have deceived himself into believing this, but at the heart of it, his actions were selfish and petty.

He covets Will and no one else can have him.

The thought makes him giddy.

Will knows he thrives off Hannibal the very way Hannibal thrives off of him and however sick he knows this makes him, at least he owns it. It's an obsessive, sick thing and he's not proud of it but neither can he deny it.

His every waking thought is consumed with what Hannibal is doing, what he's thinking, if he's thinking of him, and he cringes when he realizes how much it sounds like he's pining, but that's what it is. He pines for him. He'd been pining for years.

It's no fledgling infatuation either, this bond has been weaving itself between them since the beginning and he knows it surpassed mere curiosity miles ago. They've danced around it, confused themselves and each other and made too many regrettable mistakes because neither of them had dared risk the fragile thing they had to define it.

“If I am Bluebeard's wife, I would have preferred to be the last,” Bedelia firmly informs Will, intense emotion swimming behind her eyes as they focus intently into his, sharp as the edge of a blade and effused with unspoken accusation. But he can spare no sympathy for her resigned devastation. His brain is still stuttering over what her words imply.

He didn't have to ask to know the answer, but a part of him wanted... had to hear it verbalized.

“Is Hannibal in love with me?” Will asks.

Bedelia gazes placidly across at him. When she responds, she does so slowly, choosing every word with meticulous care. “Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes.”

He can tell in an instant that this is neither her professional assessment nor her personal opinion. It's been implanted. She was merely a surrogate with the implanted knowledge awaiting the recipient to ask the right question and Will is stunned by how clever that is. The confirmation he'd craved is his, and that means he's won an advantage.

“But do you ache for him?” Bedelia asks finally.

Will hasn't stopped aching.

Hannibal had never wanted a version of Will, he wanted the real man beneath, stripped of all the layers.

Will had come to him drowning in an confused assemblage of personas he'd emulated throughout the years mashed together to form an erratic, dysfunctional personality, and somehow, underneath the surface, Hannibal saw something salvageable, something fascinating, something precious.

At first he was only flattered, but when the inferno in his brain was at last extinguished, Will at last could see clearly, something equally evocative about his Doctor.

Hannibal's methods were unorthodox, and often amoral but they furnished results, and even if Will Graham at his most fundamental design was still clinically certifiable under a vast umbrella of disorders, at least his brand of insanity fit better than any amalgam of anything he'd worn before.

And somehow, he was both pleased and appalled that the result was copacetic with Hannibal's. Hannibal, of course, was exultant.

The true Will Graham felt free in that short time he was allowed to be himself.

He's not sure when Hannibal equated with freedom, but after the two became linked, his mind stubbornly held fast to that notion. He can't pretend what this forecasts for his intentions.

At the sink, he fills up a glass of cold water, gargles, and spits out the stale taste in his mouth. His teeth feel gummy but he doesn't care and glancing at his haggard reflection with utter ambivalence, Will sweeps a hand over the rough shadow of his beard. He'll take care of it tomorrow.

Once he collapses into bed, sleep evades him. Though all his muscles scream with exhaustion, his brain rebels with a maelstrom of whirring thoughts he can't seem to clamp.

When his eyes adjust to the dark he watches the warping patterns the ceiling makes dancing with shadows. His tiny, private oasis breathes it's placid lull and Will listens intently to the chorus: the dull hum of electricity generating through the wires, the rattle of radiated heat steaming through the pipes, hissing softly from the vents, the snoring of the dogs on the floor at his bedside, the familiar creak of the house settling into it's foundation, the crackling window casings disturbed by the rustling breeze, and he mentally cards through the cache of dossiers until he finds the right one to deafen the deluge of anxiety.

He closes his eyes and counts the swing of the pendulum.

When he opens his eyes he's no longer Will Graham.

There is a gaping maw in the core of him, a chasmic hollow whose origin he'd embodied years ago, a pure sociopathic neurotype. He's channeled this one before to cope in times of heightened levels of stress or grief, though, instead of serving it's intended purpose, he's been rendered with an unsettling sense of hyper-clarity.

He's compelled to continue his most recent train of thought, though he knows it was heading down a dangerous path.

He sees.

He sees the diaphanous truth in the fact that he and Hannibal have reached a volatile juncture. Neither can exist without the other, yet, neither can they exist independently of each other.

It needs to be constrained to a private arena, the two of them alone.

He hatches a workable plan. It will involve manipulating Jack and Alana and will endanger everybody.

Through an egotistical burst of endorphins and noripinephrine he registers a faint sense of alarm wringing and clawing it's way to the surface. He snaps himself out of it, though it takes several tries, and once more, Will is himself.

He thinks he should be more horrified. He wishes he could want to kill the idea in it's infancy, instead, he trembles with excitement, softly giggling to himself and he knows he sounds like a lunatic.

He envisions the plan enacted, calculates the potential cause and effect.

It's glorious.

He promises himself he'll mull it over again in the morning and finally sleep claims him.

Chapter 2

For a thankful few hours, Will's mind allows him a few solid hours of undisturbed peace before it turns against him. He first stirs awake to a sense of tentative unease slowly maturing in one of the many dark corners of his subconscious.

He shakes it off and stumbles out of bed to use the toilet. This wakes up Winston, and with a concerned whine, the dog follows him and sits patiently outside the door as Will relieves himself. After splashing some cold water in his face, he leads him outside. The cold night air accosts him unpleasantly but he decided to tough it out rather than delay the process by running back inside to fetch a jacket. Suppressing a yawn under his hand, Will watches an owl swoop down out of a tree, and hears the distant chirp of raccoons somewhere out beyond the copse of trees by the shed. His teeth begin to chatter as he waits for Winston to finish up his business.

When he comes back inside he feels his way blindly back to bed and buries himself under a mound of blankets.

His thoughts once more, prod at him.

He knows running away with Hannibal should never be entertained as an option. The bastard quickly dispelled him of that fantasy in Florence. It would be insane to even consider it again.

He can't help but snort at himself for that. If anyone loves to propagate his insanity more than himself it's Hannibal. He has a very literal, sizable appetite for the contents of Will's skull.

Out of reflex, he rubs the scar on his forehead. This scar, as well as Hannibal's incarceration are both damning evidence that neither of them were ready to run away together back then. They masqueraded around for too long and he supposes it was too much to hope for that Hannibal might catch the glimmer of truth behind the mask Will had to wear. Sometimes Will even forgot which mask he was wearing and for whom he kept it on for. Perhaps he expected too much out of Hannibal's usually keen sense of intuition. Will knows what the morally correct decision is, though he does not pretend to know how he will endure the maintenance of this choice for the rest of life. Entertaining the alternative is too alluring a prospect, and giving any credence to it hurts too much because he wants it too much.

He also reminds himself that severe sleep-deprivation combined with the mind-fuck of psychopaths he's invited into his head over the last couple of days have opened a can of worms, blurring the lines of his already tenuous grasp of morality. He feels himself kamikazi-ing into the choice, and though he still might have time to pull back, he's not sure he wants to. That's about as much as he can conclude before he just begins to drift off again.

Of course, inevitably, not minutes later, he's seized by an inexplicable, unholy fear that jars him back to immediate consciousness, only, he finds himself immobilized by paralysis, beholden to lucidly watch the terrifying interplay of light and shadow spawn their frightening hallucinations before his disbelieving eyes. He convulses himself out of it, and after catching his breath, angrily dry-throat swallows a handful of sedatives. They stick on their way down

his esophagus as he lays in bed, waiting for them to take effect, watching motes of dust illuminated by moonlight float by his window.

He doesn't know if he's ever actually closed his eyes for any length of time before he's once again disturbed.

“I am here.”

The whisper permeates through the void until it dissipates, graduating into a fuzzy sense of awareness. Bewildered, Will blinks trying to force his eyes to adjust, but to no avail as the world materializes distorted, shrouded in a kind of gossamery veil and this new, unexpected handicap immediately alerts him that something is very wrong. A bad feeling settles in the pit of his stomach.

All these interruptions in his sleep, followed by this fresh batch of madness is too much like before.

“You are safe.” In other words, *You are not unwell*, the assurance implies, originating from a source outside himself. He registers within the subtext a slight note of amusement at his expense, but it's not intentionally unkind.

“Look,” he's commanded. *Do you see?*

Will reticently complies, peering out at his surroundings and there is a modicum of relief he finds in recognition. He's spent countless nights standing in this very spot.

Behind his house at the edge of his property-line is an unwritten testament in the worn lawn where he's paced, wasting hours trying to untangle the complex knots of his mind. But again, that he would wake here is not reassuring.

However, he can sense a peculiar difference and this is even more unsettling. He thinks he remembers going outside not even hours ago and yet the landscape is changed. It's wilder, teeming with fresh secrets and the dark silhouette of the woods seems to radiate a forbidding aura. Just overhead, breaking through a dense overhang of clouds, a strange sallow light spills over the treetops, filtering down across the unyielding overgrowth of the fields before diffusing into a hazy curtain of fog. Will is skilled at reading the sun as a gauge, but this light defies logic, it's arbitrary positioning identifying neither time nor season.

The air feels damp, hanging in a heavy chill around him, and through the cloying stench of decay he can detect a fragrance of new growth emerging. Experimentally, he inhales it in. When he breathes back out again, it leaves behind the subtle taste of promise. It's a harbinger of the change Will doesn't know if he's ready for. Wrapping his arms around himself, he shivers.

“Have faith,” suggests the calm, compelling presence. *Believe in me*.

The reverberating echo inside his head sounds familiar and nags at a memory, but he's too disoriented to make the connection.

“I am here,” he's reminded, *look at me*.

And then it clicks. Of course.

Curiosity overcomes his trepidation and he looks. He knows what to look for, seeking His shape through the nebulous shadows. There, in the clearing, lit by a single, distilled ray of light appears a blurry, mutable mirage vacillating in indecisive form; neither stag, monster nor man but instead, a simultaneous amalgamation of all three, a symbolic triad reflectively embodying all Will doesn't understand, fears and yearns for.

“You still waver,” the entity notes, impatient.

“Why are you here?” Will demands.

The answer is simple and succinct. “You summoned me.”

He supposes he has.

“I will always be here when you need me. I am a part of you, Will, as you are a part of me.” *We are kindred.*

We are family.

The idea of denying their bond to this figment seems futile. They both know better.

“I'm dreaming this,” Will states for the sake of his own sanity.

“That is of no consequence.” *Reality is irrelevant to conviction.*

Will wants to know why, but he can't find his voice to ask the question.

“You see me.” *Please, see me.*

Will hears the plaintive, anguished hope in that; after all, it's barely disguised. He imagines for once it might be for his benefit. Hannibal no longer has much use for charades.

“Accept me, Will. Accept *us,*” Hannibal petitions.

He's surprised by how utterly this moves him.

“I want to,” he confesses through a half-sob, collapsing forward on his knees. *I have to*.

The tentative form of the apparition at last substantializes, becoming the man. Will can barely bear to look at him through the tears swimming in his eyes but when he does, he sees Hannibal has offered Will his hand. His eyes, as he looks at Will, shine with all the depth of his requited longing.

Will reaches for him but before they can make contact to seal their bond, before he can bridge that last gap that will seal his fate, the vision vanishes, abruptly shattering into a new one.

Hannibal lays slain and Will is covered in blood but it's neither of theirs.

Desperately confused and wracked by grief he feels himself begin to panic and again, in a flash, the scene changes and Hannibal's body is superimposed by another's. This time, however, he knows the blood on his hands is the same as his victim's. He catches a glimpse of Hannibal watching him from somewhere too remote, and his expression services nothing.

He feels nothing for Will but cold, detached satisfaction for Will's work.

And then he sees it's not Hannibal, but Garrett Jacob Hobbs, congratulating himself for finally making him *see*.

Will recoils in horror from the repugnant visage but this too, is promptly replaced by a swift descension of vengeance arriving in the forms of Alana, Bedelia and Molly to present tribunal. His crimes are enumerated in the receipt of accusation, judgment and betrayal. He wants to be sorry but it wouldn't be for the right reason. Jack looks disgusted and resigned and he watches alongside the others as the Great Red Dragon in all his majesty stalks forward, advancing upon him, backing Will to the lip of a cliff.

His tail whips and his expansive wings unfold.

"*This is your becoming*," Dolarhyde tells him before shoving him off the edge.

Will falls.

As he falls he reflects. There is no remorse, save, for one regret.

And then, he's falling *with* Hannibal.

"I had a dream about this once," he pictures himself telling Hannibal in another reality.

He would look at Will wondering and humors the thought. *"Do you know how it ends?"* Hannibal will ask.

Will can see himself smile at him as he tells him the truth.

"I don't know."

They cling to each other, and the frigid sea welcomes them as they crash through the surface into deliverance.

Will jolts awake, sputtering and choking for air, and when he finds it he frantically sucks it down in short, ragged gasps, gripping one hand into the sheets to brace himself while the other clamps his chest over his pounding heart. When he recovers, he realizes he's soaked in sweat, but it takes a minute to register his cheeks are wet from more than that.

The dream was vivid but whether a portent or promise, it's gifted him the initiative he needs.

Without a second thought, Will dials Jack.

Chapter 3

The skeleton of a plan weaves itself loosely together in Will's mind, it's bones fluid and imprecise but enough to set things in motion. The flesh will generate improvised as necessary.

“The Dragon likely thinks you're as much of a monster as you think he is,” Hannibal tells him, prodding the beast.

Will sucks in a small breath, the suggestion striking exactly the chord it's meant to. Like a fish that's taken the bait, the deft slit of the sharp hook is swift as it slices through the surface, grazing over the pulsing vein of his egotism in a teasing threat.

Will knows the response he hunts for, how much he craves to see how Will wears the flush of heady, primordial machismo, the desire to dominate the challenger, but Will denies him the satisfaction.

Hannibal's steady, calculating gaze pierces through him, unmerciful and expectant, sparking with malevolent ownership of the power he thinks he still wields, but Will, for once, firmly in control, hands him no victory and remains unmoved; the provocation redundant.

He needs no further fertilization to bloom.

Will sees the tiny crease of confusion knit between his narrowed eyes as Hannibal examines him, and then, finding not what he's looking for; not what reaction he was expecting to exploit, but instead, something vastly more rewarding than he'd ever hoped to find, his expression recalibrates into something more fittingly inscrutable to shield them both from exposure.

The walls have ears as well as eyes and they watch intently.

All that remains betrayed, reveals itself only to Will in the appreciative eclipse of Hannibal's pupils expanding over the scarlet blood-moon of his eyes. They drink each other in for a long second before Will remembers to follow the script their spies expect.

“Is this a competition?” He asks, bristling with bitter contempt, pretending he resents the implication.

“*Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one is striving to forsake its brother*,” Hannibal muses.“Don't you crave change, Will?”

And oh, God, does he. His shudder of revulsion is a brittle face for the hunger he really feels. He only prays he's not as transparent as Hannibal's amusement suggests.

At Quantico, Will delivers his idea, weaving it with urgent spontaneity through the argument of his colleagues. It takes a great deal of effort to tamp down the nervous itch of energy vibrating under his skin to create the illusion of confidence, swallowing back an uneasy

inkling that when he isn't looking, the two of them are colluding over him in a silent exchange of doubt and suspicion. Being realistic, he knows it's only in his mind: a paranoia, a product of his guilt.

These are his oldest allies, and however damaged and damaging his relationships with them are, they trust him, though he knows this trust is shallow, based on the flawed supposition that the kinship of their victim-hood bind Will implicitly to their cause.

In spite of his resentment for how often they've misused and imposed upon him, it was an expense they saw a validity in, the cost was a minimal sacrifice.

Will was a price they were always willing to pay, and now, this Judas Kiss is the accrual of that interest.

Their arrangement is familiar: Alana sits wing-side of Will, predictably disagreeable while Will appeals to Jack, situated at the helm, separated by the wide expanse of his desk delineating his position of superiority. He owns the final decision, and fortunately he is proving incrementally more tractable as the night wears on.

“We don't have anything else?” Will asks, maneuvering the idea into Jack's possession.

“Eight people dead in a month. We can't play the long game. You know and I know it's the best way to bait him.”

Bait. Will snags onto the word and leads it around to it's obvious conclusion.

“Give him a shot at me.”

“It'd feel like a trap to me. And it'll feel like a trap to him. Unless you have a professional voice to legitimize what you're saying,” Alana points out.

“Someone to hide the wire on the snare,” Will muses. “Are you volunteering?”

“No. I'd have to be a fool.”

They all know the fool who will.

Frederick Chilton is returned to them in a blazing inferno, doused in a fountain in the middle of the following night.

They watch the recording together. Shirtless and trembling, Chilton speaks aloud the words he's fed.

“All that I said was lies from Will Graham.”

“ I have blasphemed against the Dragon.”

“Even so, the Dragon is merciful."

“Because I was forced to lie, he will be more merciful to me than to you, Will Graham.”

“Reach behind you and feel the small knobs on the top of your pelvis.”

“ Feel your spine between them; that is the precise spot where the Dragon will snap your spine. There is much for you to dread.”

The moon's cast stretches it's way between the curtains of the somber room where Will recounts his latest sin. He knows she sees behind his mask, as she had seen behind Hannibal's-- as they both have seen behind her own, and this grants him a sort of peace, a tainted canvas to paint on liberally; to destroy if necessary.

“He wanted the world to know his face,” Will explains, “And now he doesn't have one.”

Bedelia watches him with detached tranquility, passing no judgment, but she doesn't have to, her silence invites the question anyway.

“*Damned if I'll feel*,” he snarls.

The raw, hostile honesty hangs heavy over them.

“We are all making our way through the Inferno. Dante's pilgrims,” She tells him solemnly.

“No, we're not pilgrims. We're pets. And the Great Red Dragon kills pets first.”

“You put your hand on Dr. Chilton's shoulder in the photograph. Touch gives the world an emotional context. The touch of others makes us who we are. It builds trust."

“I put my hand on his shoulder for authenticity.”

“To establish that he really told you those insults about the Dragon? Or maybe you wanted to put Dr. Chilton at risk? Just a little?” Bedelia gasps softly with realization.

“I wonder,” She says, tilting her head and gazing across at him shrewdly. “Do you have to wonder?”

“No,” he replies, glancing out the window as a cloud passes over the stars.

Another night passes and once more, in less than a week, Will is standing over the bedside of another woman who's survived the wrath of the Dragon, and he marvels at her strength. She is not just any other woman, nor any other victim. Reba is the embodiment of the Dragon's redemption foresaken.

It's hard for Will not to hate her.

It's hard not to blame her and here she lay, perfectly vulnerable, unsuspecting, and he could strangle her. So easily steal from her the life she's unwittingly stolen from him with her careless compassion.

But then, he sees in her himself and forgives her ignorance.

“He shot himself in the face. I put my hand in it. He set fire to the house. He was on the... the floor...” She whimpers.

“In the end he couldn't kill you and he couldn't watch you die. The people who study this kind of thing say that he was trying to stop because you helped him. Probably saved some lives.” Will offers.

“I drew a freak,” She says, distraught, self-castigating.

“You didn't draw a freak. You drew a man with a freak on his back. There is nothing wrong with you.”

“I know there's nothing wrong with me,” Reba tells him proudly, “In making friends, I try to be wary of people who foster dependency and feed on it. I've been with a few. The blind attract them.”

Will finds a darkly ironic humor in this. “Not just the blind,” he corrects.

Back to the drawing board, he thinks.

He pushes through heavy, cast iron gates, entering into the open nave of a softly lit cathedral. He approaches Hannibal casually, coming up beside him as he extinguishes a single flame with a pinch of his fingers.

“*Ding-Dong*, the Dragon's dead,” Will informs him, still burning with anger.

Hannibal can smell it on him but can't identify the cause and Will doesn't see fit to clarify it for him.

“It's a shame. You came all this way and you didn't get to kill anybody. Only consolation is Dr. Chilton. Congratulations for the job you did on him. I admired it enormously. What a cunning boy you are.”

Clearly, this is Hannibal's petulant revenge for Will's misdirected bad mood. It's a little *bitchy*.

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“Does the enemy inside you agree with the accusation? Even a little bit?” Hannibal's question echoes Bedelia's and Will fells no need to deign this with an answer they all already know.

Then, bleak reality resumes, and again, they are separated by a sheet of thick glass.

“I came back to stop the Dragon,” he defends. “He's stopped.”

“Your family was on his itinerary. Safe now. You can go home again. If there's any point. Is there any point?” There is a lingering, unresolved insecurity in this that begs to be addressed.

Will blinks his surprise, confused before remembering that, sheltered as Hannibal is in this prison, he wouldn't know of his and Molly's recent estrangement. In actuality, he doubts

anyone else would be aware of it either, save for Jack, whom he doesn't quite recall telling, but suspects his silence on the matter may infer what he's intuited.

As he looks back at Hannibal's frustrated expression, a small, mean part of Will enjoys the idea of prolonging his torture. He'd thought they'd understood each other, he'd thought Hannibal understood what Will was trying to do for them. He'd thought, perhaps he'd find in this visit some company in his grief.

“I like my life there,” he counters.

“It won't be the same,” Hannibal argues, turning away. Will watches him pace in his cell. “You'll see it's not the same. The unspoken knowledge will live with you, like unwanted company in the house.”

“Molly and I want it to be the same.”

Hannibal turns back to Will, approaching him until he's mere inches from the glass. When he meets his eyes Will feels the other man's longing and regret and he feels chastised by it.

“When life becomes maddeningly polite... think about me. Think about me, Will. Don't worry about me.” Try not to, he challenges. Will feels the ache of longing reflected back at him. The air feels constricting between them, so thick he can barely choke it down.

“You turned yourself in so I would always know where you were,” he reminds Hannibal, his throat feeling tight. “You'd only do that if I rejected you.” He does not wait for a response.

“Goodbye,” Will says succinctly, turning around quickly to leave before he can't. Before security will have to escort him out when he throws himself savagely, kicking and punching at the impossible barrier between them.

“Will...” Hannibal calls out and Will can barely bear to meet his sorrowful gaze when he glances back. “Will, was it good to see me?”

Will would laugh if he could. “Good? No.”

The door slams shut behind him as he wants to slam shut this failed chapter of his failed life.

Will does not expect, when he returns to his slum room in the slum motel he's temporarily parked his bags at, to be ambushed the moment he turns the lock from inside. He puts up a good struggle and is knocked unconscious for his trouble. When he comes to, his confusion surrenders to immediate relief, though were he a little more sane, he thinks he should probably be terrified.

“Things work out like they are meant to,” Molly had once told him. He thinks he may believe her now.

“Do you think you can sit up? Try to sit up,” he's instructed.

“You didn't break my back,” Will points out.

“Your face is closed to me,” Dolarhyde growls-- *the Dragon growls.* Will climbs inside the monster's head. It's dark here, safe and hot and teeming with violence, masterfully contained.

“If I can see you, you can see me.”

“You think you understand, don't you?”

“I understand,” Will explains, “that *blood and breath* are only elements undergoing change to fuel your *Radiance*.”

“Hannibal said those words. To me. I wanted to share with Lecter and Lecter betrayed me.”

“He betrayed me too,” Will whispers, seeking the Dragon's solidarity. Or maybe permitting the Dragon to seek solidarity with him. The intent is hazier now as he bobs in and out of his identity; *their identity*.

“I would like to share.”

“You shared with Reba.”

“I shared with Reba a little,” the Dragon agrees, “In a way that she could survive.”

“But you didn't *change* her.”

“I chose not to change her. I'm stronger than the Dragon now.”

Will understands that more fluently than anyone; he too, can slip back into himself and feel the truth of his nature to be more powerful, more dangerous than any other's he's ever experienced.

“Hannibal Lecter is who you need to change.”

“I want to meet Lecter. How would I manage that?”

This is exactly the question he'd hoped to be asked.

Chapter 4

Like a sign, the sun shines brightly, not a cloud in the sky as Will drives back to headquarters. He inhales the crisp, clean air blowing in through his rolled-down window deep into his lungs, faith renewed.

The Great Red Dragon lives.

He's never been much for praying, sparing little credence to the spiritual, but he feels indebted to whatever higher authority has granted him this boon.

Will is ambitious for success. Resurrected back into his pivotal role, Dolarhyde possesses a rare blend of malleability and dangerous canny that in his absence, no alternate contender could play. Failure seemed eminent.

Will took it hard and resolved to seed a rift. *Good,* he thought at the time, that he hadn't spelled out his intentions and left with his tail between his legs and Hannibal with a lingering sense of false hope.

Though now, though hope is restored, his good mood is dampened by the recollection of his last, bitter departure interjecting itself, hatching into a picture of Hannibal hanging on that soured note, stewing in a broth of fresh resentment. Were their bond any less strong, he'd be likely to take Will's ruthless, angry rejection as literally as the loudly slammed door of his exit. Given up on, abandoned once again in the cage he'd trapped himself in *for Will*, he imagines Hannibal might presently be considering how best to eat him.

Betrayal never sat well with the Doctor; Will's many scars can testify to that. For years he avoided looking at them, the marring of his skin felt like embarrassing evidence of what they meant to each other.

He hated when Molly looked at them. Resented her for knowing his secret and not understanding. He didn't want her to understand. Not because he was ashamed, but because he couldn't abide her mistaken platitudes nor misplaced sympathy, or, more aptly, her *jealousy*.

Now, sans the baggage of external judgment, when he looks at his naked reflection, he likes how he looks with them. They serve as little reminders, marks of their master. The clean, surgical line of his healed vivisection glows smooth and pale and he still feels the pressure of Hannibal's hand, a warm, invisible brand on the back of his neck where he'd held him close, his hot breath rushing over Will's face, his eyes shining with unbidden tears as Will's life spilled over the knife in his hand between them.

He rolls up his window as his thoughts stray, taking an interesting turn. Lured, Will follows them curiously, allowing them to mature as he supplants himself into Hannibal's mind, seeing as he sees as the image manifests.

The table is set and the platter is placed in the center between the candle sticks. It's long as a coffin, and the flames flicker softly off the silver lid as it's gently removed and set aside with profound care for the entree. Revealed, Will sees himself artfully filleted, rose petals as scarlet as blood lain delicately over his eyes. There is something religious about the presentation, much has been dedicated to it's creation.

It's the Last Supper and the cannibal dines alone.

He watches with burgeoning arousal, entranced, as his flesh is coveted. Hannibal lifts each bite up to his mouth with slow reverence. Will hears himself groan, and it's matched by the Doctor's as his eyes flutter shut, lips closing around the tines of his fork. Every taste is relished, savored.

He consumes and is, in turn, consumed.

Hannibal's eyes reopen, fastening onto his, “I think I'll eat your heart,” he tells him, making Will sublime by his desire.

The office building comes into view, and Will shakes his head, clearing away the vision. After pulling into the designated spot out front, he turns off his car and glances at his clock. It's too early. He wants to give Jack the appearance of recovering from a traumatic experience, if he goes in now, with this eager energy, he'll see right through it.

With a frustrated sigh, Will sits back in his seat and adjust himself, his pants constricting uncomfortably against his groin. The fullness is strange to him. The reaction is unfamiliar, it's something he hasn't felt in any genuine way for far too long, but he doesn't need to look too closely at it's motive. He understands the metaphor. Being eaten doesn't turn him on, but undeniably, being the object of Hannibal's undivided, focused lust does.

Now that the seal's broken, it can't be resealed. He doesn't just need Hannibal, he *wants* him. Obviously this revelation does not send him running toward the hills, but there is a sense that sex might cheapen the purity of whatever this *thing* is between them. Also, he still clings to a deeply ingrained sense of necessity that reminds him to always wear a face of conformity, and feeble as it is, it's allowed him, albeit still somewhat poorly, to function. The world is unkind, aberration earns ostracism and he's always had more than enough to spare without adding to the collection.

This aspect of himself, though not new, has never posed problematic enough to lose sleep over. He's never lain awake at night agonizing over the fluid edges of his sexuality when he's had bigger fish to fry, but then, he's never met a man that's warranted that kind of devotion until Hannibal crept into his life, interrupting it's dysfunctional conventionality.

To consummate physically the intimate tangle of the feelings they harbor seems a very likely, natural progression of development, and he's surprised he hadn't considered it before. He wonders if Hannibal has.

Will stops short, the realization dawning on him that Hannibal, more *worldly*, more *insightful* about such things than Will, has surely more than just considered it, he's actively *nurtured* it.

Playing a retrospective analysis over all the little moments he hadn't read enough into he can see how painfully obvious it must have been. They'd been flirting with each other for *years*.

The Chesapeake Ripper, the Copy-Cat Killer, all those crime scenes had been an elaborate seduction, and like a wolf leading a lamb to slaughter, he might have used Will's unconscious attraction to lure him into the fold without necessarily ever intending to bed him... unless it came to that.

The doubt unravels him, shakes his conviction.

And then he recalls all the times he's unwittingly rejected the tiny offered intimacies, the touch of a hand: thoughtlessly shrugged off, the press of an arm against his own: stepped away from, the oft ignored, meaningful glances: looked away from, all the seemingly indecipherable sentiments and soft endearments: tossed haplessly aside.

He tried to give him a family, and Will was too clumsy to take it.

It's time to go in.

Jack's scowl Will mirrors perfectly, sans feeling the fury behind it.

He informs him Forensics has identified Dolarhyde's replacement he'd made for Reba, the corpse's head blown through by a 12 gauge fitted with his Grandmother's old vulcanite dentures.

“The obvious thing,” he tells Jack, “Is to get him to come to us. Bait him with something he wants more than me.”

“He'd have to be an idiot to go for it.”

“I know. Want to hear what the best bait would be?”

“I'm not sure I want to,” Jack replies, uneasy.

“Hannibal would be the best bait.”

“Why in God's name would anyone want to meet Hannibal Lecter?”

Will almost smiles. “To kill him, Jack. The Dragon could absorb him that way, engulf him, become more than he is.”

“You sound pretty sure.”

“I'm not sure. Who's sure? I'm not even sure Hannibal would draw the Dragon. I just say that it's our best shot.”

“Set him up how?” Jack demands, skeptical.

“We take Hannibal into federal custody, We fake an escape.”

The ball is rolling, a boulder down a hill, too heavy for even Sisyphus to hold.

He returns to Dr. Du Maurier to deliver his news.

“We assign a moment to decision.” Bedelia cautions, “What you propose is so thoughtless, I find it difficult to imagine that moment exists.”

Will sees her fingers clench around her drink, her chastisement falling hard between them.

“Decisions are made of kneaded feelings,” Will tells her. “They're more often a lump than a sum.”

“However you think you're going manipulate this situation to your advantage, think again.”

“There is no advantage. It's all degrees of disadvantage.”

Bedelia stares at him sternly. “Who holds the Devil, let him hold him well. He will hardly be caught a second time.”

“I don't intend Hannibal to be caught a second time,” Will admits. It's careless, but he doesn't care. She's no one to stop him.

“Can't live with him, can't live without him. Is that what this is?”

Will shrugs. “I guess this is *my Becoming*.”

“What you're 'becoming' is pathological,” She bites out crisply.

“Extreme acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy.”

Bedelia is unimpressed. “You've just found religion.”

“Nothing more dangerous than that,” he agrees. “I'd pack my bags if I were you, Bedelia. Meat's back on the menu.”

“You righteous, reckless, twitchy little man,” She lashes back, claws out, “He might as well cut all of our throats and be done with it.”

“Ready or not,” Will smirks, “*Here he comes*.”

Chapter 5

“There's a deal for you, Hannibal. Or there could be,” Alana tells the prisoner.

“A deal? With whom?”

“The FBI.”

Jack and Will watch remotely from the privacy of Alana's waiting room as she illustrates their plan.

“If you cooperate with the capture of Francis Dolarhyde, you get your books, your drawings. Your toilet. All privileges will be restored,” she promises.

“You trust Will with my well-being?” Hannibal questions, a hint of humor coloring his tone.

“As much as I trust you with his.”

Will watches him chew on this.

“You trust me with yours?” He asks after a beat. “You intend to release me into police custody. Police are not as wise as you are. I might escape in earnest and come to kill you.”

“First chance you get, I assume,” She replies grimly.

“You died in my kitchen, Alana, when you chose to be brave. Every moment since is borrowed. Your wife... your child... they belong to me. We made a bargain for Will's life and then I spun you gold.”

Alana steps closer to the glass until they're within inches of each other. To Will and Jack's mutual dismay this muffles whatever they're saying. Jack attempts to fix the issue, cranking the dial to the limit and while this serves to amplify the sound, the audio is now savaged by a shrill static, rendering the rest of the exchange indecipherable.

Will leans forward, peering hard at the screen and his eyes dart across the intricate minutia of their body language striving hard to interpret what they're saying through sight alone.

He's seen the tensed, arching back, hackles raised, posturing of two dogs preparing to engage in a battle for dominance. This is not dissimilar.

Alana takes a half step back; it's a yield.

Hannibal thrills in the small victory. Of course, he's excellent at resembling a statue, presenting a reserved demeanor that would be impervious to any other viewer. Will, having spent more time in his company than most, has observed and cached away a vast collection of the man's more subtle nuances. This affords him the ability to see the gloating amusement beneath the stone exterior for what it is.

Alana's shoulders slump in defeat. This alone speaks volumes. She must have hoped Hannibal's pride might refuse to bend to the promised return of his meager creature-comforts. Will could hear it when she offered them, as if the basic conveniences were trifling; the meanest, barest reward. She would think that if he's agreed to participate, it must mean he is either very bored or sees the obvious, exploitable flaw.

She had prayed he wouldn't pluck the pitiful, low-hanging fruit.

She hated the plan, her every objection made very vocally transparent. Will knew she saw the desperate necessity in it Jack has, but unlike Jack, she had also seen the intimate danger inherent in it's fragility.

Will is fluent in despair, and he reads it clearly when she turns away to exit. He sees the anger glittering in her eyes. He imagines what she envisions: the single misstep, that will, as a terrible augury, spell inevitable disaster for her entire, carefully constructed world.

Her reaction is all he needs to come to the obvious conclusion: *Hannibal has agreed.*

A small thrill races through him but he suppresses it quickly after Jack shuts off the monitor.

They sit in a lumbering stretch of silence and Will bristles under the tingle of Jack's eyes boring a hole through him. He detects an air of criticism coming off the other man he's unprepared to address so instead, he attends to the patterns of the marbled floor, staring at it stubbornly until Jack clears his throat, eliciting his attention.

“He will not be your pawn easily, Will, and neither will I,” he warns him sternly.

Will forces himself to meet the Detective's hard, unwavering gaze. “I know what I'm doing,” he tells him, projecting an air of confidence he doesn't fully feel.

Jack scoffs. “I think we both know you don't. Not entirely.”

Shifting tactics, Will drops his eyes to his hands folded neatly in his lap. Unthreading his fingers, he runs them along the tops of his thighs, worrying at the wrinkles in the fabric. The act is deliberate, meant to look reflexive, unintentional; exposing the anxiety Jack needs to see for assurance.

Jack expects the old Will, the unenlightened Will, the comforting version of Will he's familiar with; teeming with insecurities. “You're right,” he confesses. “I'm winging it.”

Jack sighs, pulling a hand over his face. He looks tired. “I hope you grasp what's at stake.”

Will is silent. He plays with a loose thread on the cuff of his sleeve, unable to meet this with any worthy reply.

“I'm pinning my professional reputation on your ability to deliver, Will, my *personal integrity*. For your sake, I hope you've armed yourself against the fallout.”

The Detective's firm pause commands Will's focus back up at him.

“*Potential* fallout,” Jack amends. “Failure is not an option.”

Will shrugs. “I'll do what has to be done,” he answers truthfully.

“Do not,” Jack rebukes, “*Do not* approach this with a cavalier attitude.”

“I'm anything but 'cavalier', Jack,” Will bites out, incensed.

Jack scowls. “Do not belabor any under any misapprehensions, Will."

"I try not to give them much merit," Will smirks.

"Do not pretend I don't know you," Jack reminds him, "I know you. I know you well, and I know what you're thinking."

'Do you?', Will wants to ask.

“I'm going to warn you now, you're on a short leash. Don't be noble. I don't like martyrs. I need you back alive."

Jack needs him back. To what purpose? He'd vowed to set him free after this, but, of course he'd never meant it. He'd spent years waiting for the right opportunity to drag Will back into the fold and now that he's got him, he'll hardly let him scamper off again.

As bitter as this tastes, it's a little endearing Jack's faith in his motives is still so unswerving and pure. His faith makes a convenient blinder.

"Whatever you've got rooting around in that skull of yours, I want you to forget it," he demands of him. "Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Will replies, striving not to sound as flippant as he feels. “I *appreciate* your concern, Jack.”

Of course, Jack's keen ears apparently hear right through this, but whatever form of remonstration this solicits is interrupted by a soft knock, followed by the quiet squeak of the door opening, drawing both of their attention to Alana.

“It's me,” she announces, peeking in through the crack before stepping in. It's her waiting room, so she hardly needs invitation though she waits for it anyway. Will welcomes her timely interruption with a breath of relief, his nerves fraying under the hard weight of Jack's scrutiny. Sharp as a tack, she catches it, and quickly intuiting the discomfort she's intruded on hanging heavily in the air between the two men, her hand hesitates on the door knob.

“Wow. You could cut the tension in here with a knife,” She exclaims.

“We're eager to hear your results,” Jack explains.

Only half-convinced, her curious eyes sweep to Will's, fixing to his for another explanation. Unwilling to provide one, he spares a quick glance back at Jack, pleased when he's granted a small nod confirming they're on the same page: no use adding further fuel to the fire.

Baffled to find her reception met with conspiratorial silence, she examines them both with a skeptical frown. Despite her best efforts, she can read very little, save for the obvious knives they're sitting on. Everything hinges on the outcome.

“Alright,” she huffs, shutting the door with indignant emphasis before striding curtly into the office.

She begrudges her exclusion, distrusts it. Pulling out her chair with more force than necessary, the feet scrape loudly across the floor. She ignores it, staring at them coldly.

“The situation being what it is, considering the depth of my involvement, I expect you'll inform me of anything you think I might need to know,” she admonishes.

“Of course,” Jack assuages, “Please, have a seat.

Alana complies, tucking the pleats of her skirt politely beneath her before she sits. After crossing her legs she pulls the hem back to it's respectable length and smooths her hands over the creases.

"We missed the tail-end, damn mic couldn't catch what you said," Jack admits, shooting a look at Will.

"We got as far as the part where he threatens you," he adds helpfully. Alana scowls.

"You make nice friends, Will," She spits back.

"Well, you do *buy* them for me."

"Let's not antagonize each other," Jack interjects. "Alana, what happened next?"

“As far as I can garner, Hannibal has tentatively agreed to the deal, as proposed.”

“What will it take to make him less tentative?”

“He wants Will to ask him. And he wants you to say 'please',” Alana adds, looking at Will.

“I'll say 'pretty please',” he guarantees her.

Jack frowns. “People are going to stampede if they think that Lecter is out.”

“Let them stampede. *Authenticity,* " Will asserts. "And let them believe I helped Hannibal escape.”

“'Authenticity'?” Jack blinks, gaping at Will.

"It might lend belief," Alana provides, slowly warming to the idea.

Jack's eyes dart between the two of them. "Elaborate."

“Someone has to be close. When the Dragon comes,” he explains.

Alana's forehead creases with confusion. "And then?"

He waits for it to dawn on the psychiatrist but Jack beats her to the punch. "We kill Dolarhyde."

"No," She objects. "It isn't ethical."

"You... have *'ethical'* concerns?" Will requests, tone thin with irritation.

"I don't protest on any moral ground, Will," She defends. "What you pose is illegal. We can all be prosecuted for collusion to murder."

Jack is mum. Alana stares at him accusingly. "You can't possibly condone this."

"I think it'll work," he tells Will, looking past her.

"I can't believe you're supporting this, Jack," she exclaims.

"I'm not taking sides. I see a plan. The plan fits."

Will clears his throat. "I wasn't finished."

"*God*," Alana breathes, "What else?"

"This may... put to rest any qualms you still foster," he continues. "We kill Dolarhyde. And then... we kill Hannibal."

Alana nods. "It's an attractive possibility."

"I'm in," Jack chimes, eyes sparkling darkly, "I'd sell my soul ten-fold to the Devil himself to accomplish that."

"*To the Devil his due,*" Will agrees.

The day is almost done before Will revisits the cathedral.

Standing at the chancel, in front of the altar, Hannibal waits for him. "I thought you said your good-byes."

Will bows his head. "We've one last good-bye between us," he edifies.

"You didn't just say good-bye though, did you? That little extra bit at the end. What was that you said? You'd never have turned yourself in unless I rejected you. Yes. That extra bit. I believe that's what they call a 'mic drop'. You dropped the mic, Will, but here you are having to come back and pick it up again."

The barb is earned. "I knew you would keep running if I kept chasing you. I knew you wanted me to know exactly where I could find you when I needed to."

“And you did.”

The vision disappears, dissolving again into the dismal one-monster prison.

“*I need you,* Hannibal,” Will confides in a whisper.

The confession rings between them, infused with genuine truth. Those who watch will be impressed by a convincing act of manipulation-- his *intended* audience will hear the double current and grasp it's *intended* meaning.

Hannibal's smile is secret, exclusively designed for Will.

Bingo.

He relates the rest of the plan, though it seems arbitrary to do so.

“You're our best shot, Hannibal. *Please*,” he adds, humoring the prisoner's original request.

“You are certain this is what you really want?” Hannibal asks guardedly.

Will spreads his hand over the glass.

“More than anything,” he softly affirms, the words spoken so quietly he's confident that though they carry through to the man on the other side clearly, they'll be lost to the static of anyone else listening.

Hannibal places his hand over Will's, mirroring him through the barrier.

"If you're ready, then I'm yours,” he promises, regarding him tenderly.

Affection bubbles up from the sharp ache in Will's chest, tightening in his throat. The convergence is realized: the plates move, the old ground erodes supplanted beneath the genesis.

The earth is still new and the foundation is yet to settle; but it will be sowed and it will bloom.

Will eagerly anticipates the harvest.

Chapter 6

The plan commences.

Security transports them to their chosen location.

Hannibal is bound and muzzled, flocked on either side by silent guards and Will sits across from him, couched between two others in the back of an armored van. Their transport is proceeded by an escort of squad cars, sirens blaring to clear their way.

Will feels the heat of Hannibal's eyes steadily watching him, seeking his own. He avoids the temptation to look up. He doesn't dare risk sparking the interest of Hannibal's surveillance, not trusting his ability to guard his expression from their scrutiny. The mounting pressure is tense.

Beads of sweat roll down Will's neck, soaking his collar. Beneath the layers, his undershirt too, is drenched and clinging uncomfortably to his back. The recirculated air in the cabin is sweltering, a purposeful measure to ensure their prisoner is properly subdued. Will combs his fingers through his hair, sweeping back the wet curls sticking to his forehead. A guard yawns. It catches to his fellow officer, and he watches the man wearily stifle it beneath his gloved fist. With an edging creep of guilt he wonders if he has a wife and kids at home-- how many of these men will be missed by somebody.

Too slow to look away, the guard's eyes meet his, and Will flushes self-consciously before quickly averting his gaze out the small square of the back window. He sees the lonely road blurring away behind them, swallowed by the thick of the woods on either side.

The van passes over a rut, bouncing it's occupants against each other.

Will winces as the butt of a rifle belonging to the guard sitting next to him nudges his hip. It's a vivid reminder of what they'll face.

As the officers re-situate, he steals the opportunity to discreetly case them. His eyes skim over their uniforms fully outfitted with heavy, padded vests and additional back-up arms per-regulation. Each are equipped with automatic rifles, battle-ready. Any advantage, any *edge* he and Hannibal share will be limited solely to improvisation. They'll have to rely on quick reflexes and decisive, synchronized action.

If they prove up to it.

Will wipes his sweaty palms off on his pants and swallows shakily. Success is a gamble pending on a wing and a prayer and the stakes are high. It's too late to skirt around the ante. No cashing-out allowed.

Almost unconsciously, his eyes drift to Hannibal's restraints, evaluating how they're secured, how fast they could be undone. His thoughts linger briefly over the knife in the pocket of his coat, and how best to maneuver it out without being noticed.

His examination skates up to the chin of the poly-resin muzzle before scanning around to quickly survey their company. Finding his actions having gone so far unmonitored, grants him the peace-of-mind and clearance required to at last meet Hannibal's gaze.

For the hard, long second they're fixed to each other, he finds exactly what he needs.

'Breathe,' Hannibal seems to say, his enduring calm anchoring Will.

The cocking of a barrel snaps him away, and all attention is immediately drawn outside. Curious, he peers out the window with the rest of the guards, watching as the squad cars pull formation.

A shot is fired and the patrol directly in front of them swerves out of control. They crash into it.

From here, everything spirals into chaos.

Will smacks into someone shouting as the van tosses them around, spinning out of control. He fails to find purchase on anything to hold onto before it tumbles over, throwing him violently into the wall. There's a loud crack as his head slams into the hard encasement. Pain splits through Will's skull and his vision swims, wildly off-kilter.

More shots fire out, cracking through glass and metal. A bullet tears through a guard standing right in front of him and he feels the wet splatter of blood hitting his face. Squinting, he sees a dark figure launch into the back of the van through the broken-open doors, and then his sight is obstructed by a shrouding blackness. Consciousness wavers, fading in and out through pounding agony. Will fights it tooth and nail, struggling to hold on. Straining through the shrill ringing in his ears, he hears a hurried tussle of buckles clinking and the whirring of straps being yanked loose. There is a muffled exchange of words he can't make out before finally all falls silent.

When he comes back to, he's not sure how long he's been out, but it must have been only minutes. If even. As his bearings gradually restore he sees Hannibal slipping off the mask. It's abandoned with the rest of the carnage as he steps out, stripping easily away his loosened restraints. Will climbs out carefully after him, still dizzy.

“He's not going to kill us here,” Hannibal tells him. “What he wants to do requires something a little more private.”

He watches him walk quickly to the nearest intact squad car.

“What are you doing?”

Hannibal glances back at him, bemused. “You know, Will, you worry too much.” He pulls out the cop's body and drops the dead weight aside before climbing in. In the distance, Will sees another squad car peal away at top speed in the opposite direction. He assumes this is most likely their erstwhile accomplice.

“You'd be much more comfortable if you relaxed with yourself,” Hannibal advises. Pulling around the car, he stops in front of Will. Will watches him pushe open the passenger door and shove out the other dead occupant, making space for him. “Going my way?” Hannibal asks lightly.

Will stares at him unimpressed.

He gets in anyway.

“Well, that was easier than you thought it would be, wasn't it?” Hannibal muses.

“The concussion wasn't exactly on my agenda,” Will mumbles, leaning back and closing his eyes.

“We will make a small detour, but I surmise our destination will be near enough to allow me to better attend you.”

“Where are we going?”

“I have a safe-house laying await for occasions such as this. It will afford us some time. Jack won't figure it out immediately.”

Will drops his his head to the side, peering at Hannibal out of one eye. “And Dolarhyde?”

“He's quite eager to pay us a visit.”

“He wanted to meet you alone, *to kill you* and you told him where to do it?”

Hannibal grins. “Are you *worried*, Will?”

“You told him where we are *actually* going?”

“I don't care to break promises. Even if you've made them for me,” Hannibal scolds.

Will rubs the aching bump on the back of his head and frowns. He catches the Doctor staring at him sternly in the reflection of the rear-view mirror. “We have unfinished business before we run off into the sunset, Will,” he reminds him.

They take an exit down a gravel road cutting through acres of crumpled corn-stalks.

“I wasn't arguing,” Will defends, “I was clarifying.”

An alert goes off on the MDT.

“Looks like they'll be looking for us soon.”

Will follows the direction he's looking. In the distance is a small farm.

“Shall we trade in for something less conspicuous?” Hannibal asks.

“Ditch the car, steal a new one?” *Kill the owner to prevent it from being reported?* The idea doesn't sit right with him.

“I would prefer not to inconvenience an innocent stranger if I could help it.”

“You have a safe-car for the safe-house?”

“Many.”

They pull in around the back of an abandoned barn. They walk around behind a rickety car-port with a broken down tractor underneath attached to a large shed. Hannibal kicks up the hood and digs a ring of keys out from beneath the lip of the engine mount. “Voila.”

Unlocking the shed, a plume of dust wafts out at them. Will coughs, waving a hand in front of his face as Hannibal strips the tarp off the car.

“Audi A4,” Will identifies, “Early 2000's. I take it she hasn't been turned over recently.”

“Not for years, unfortunately. A small hiccup. Think you're up to giving me a hand?” Hannibal asks, holding out a second pair of gloves.

“Drain the fluid, siphon the gas, flush the oil, replace the fluid, replace the gas, replace the oil,” Will intones, spinning the mantra aloud. The voice in his head sounds too familiar and he feels his headache pulsing behind his eyes. “We'll need a funnel, a hose and a wrench.”

He slips into command as easily as he puts on the gloves.

“Get the oil out and scrape out that crud,” he instructs, gruffer than usual.

Hannibal obeys, but not without staring at him with a curious frown.

“Did you check the brake lines before replacing the fluid?” Will asks

“Not yet.”

Will growls.

“What the hell you waiting for, the second coming?” he barks.

Hannibal stops what he's doing and levels a sharp, concerned look in his direction. “I am more than capable of completing this myself. We are almost done as it is, Will. Why don't you have a seat inside the car, and wait for me to finish topping off the coolant.”

A spike of pains shoots from the crown of his skull to dull throb, thrumming at his temples. “Fine,” he bites out, tearing open the car door and settling down into the passenger seat. He watches Hannibal finish up and close the hood. He gets in beside Will, pulls the car out and leaves it idling as he gets back out and pulls the squad car into the shed before locking up tight.

“You wore a voice I didn't recognize, Will.”

“My father taught me how to fix stuff with him. Had to have help with a lot of the heavy stuff. Couldn't afford to pay an assistant."

Hannibal is quiet.

“How often does this happen?”

“It doesn't. Not anymore. Not since... *you know.*”

Hannibal doesn't say anything and Will realizes he's waiting for him to explain.

“I can draw them into myself. Intentionally when I need to.”

“You have always been able to do that,” he agrees.

"I mean I can do it again without it being a problem. Without any bleed-through, or, or slipping."

Will stares out the window as the fields turn into woods and the woods turn back into fields.

“What are you thinking about?”

Will starts at the question. He doesn't remember. He wonders if maybe he wasn't thinking about anything. Every time he closes his eyes he sees little stars zipping and zig-zagging around and it's very distracting.

“My father was a drunk. Good at engines though. Any kind," He spares for conclusion. Though, he considers that they may have moved past that conversation a few miles ago.

Hannibal glances at him briefly, evaluating him before his eyes return to the road. “Do you feel sleepy?”

“Kind of.”

“Then I want you to keep talking, at least for the next hour.”

Will cringes. “About what? About what I've been up to for the past three years?”

He sees Hannibal wince. “I'd prefer you avoid dwelling further on that subject.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I bet,” Will quietly huffs.

They lapse into a short, uncomfortable silence.

“Fishing, then.”

"If you prefer," Hannibal offers neutrally.

Will shrugs. “If I bore you to sleep and you run us off the road into a tree then I don't see the point.”

“I never find you boring, Will,” Hannibal promises.

“While that assurance is touching, I'm sure you've never been regaled with an hour long lecture on the benefits of thermally fused superline over monofilament.”

“An argument of traditionalists vs pragmatists,” Hannibal surmises sagely.

Will stares at him. “Don't get fancy. We're talking fishing.”

He doesn't remember at what point Drop-Lining transitioned into the monotone droll of AM radio, nor when the sun had begun to set.

“You let me sleep,” he accuses through a yawn, rubbing his eyes.

“You were awake for long enough. Your concussion was minor.”

Will runs a finger curiously across a band-aid over his eyebrow.

“First-aid kit in the glove compartment.”

Will flushes, both embarrassed and a little pleased. He notices the pain in his head has ebbed to a dull ache. “I feel a little better.”

“I'm glad. We're about 10 minutes out. When we get home, I'll give you an ice pack and then you should go right back to sleep. Unfortunately if you are hungry, I have only a few canned provisions to accommodate you with.”

When we get home. Will shivers a little, too tired to lie to himself over how in love he is with how that sounds.

Chapter 7

Home.

Closing his eyes, Will can see it.

The old, intrepid house sits nobly where it's always been and at a cursory first glance appears unchanged.

It's an obfuscation-- a red-herring that yanks the halyard, hoisting up a big, fat, flashing red-flag right to the top of the finial. Although the unknown threat is unseen, he senses it and his gut-instinct warns him it isn't nice. Experience has taught Will to never put too much faith in first impressions; beneath nearly every shoal exists the potential to discover a thriving, complex ecosystem. Most of the time, if the net is cast far and swept deep enough, it will usually dredge up the monsters hiding in the dark.

Will notes an acrid pungency in the air hanging around him. The scent lingers coppery on his tongue and sour in his sinuses, and while it's easy enough to identify, it's origin is less so.

It's disturbing enough to raise his hackles and set his teeth on edge because he knows well that olfactory memory is rare to reproduce outside of imprinted sets of descriptions and associations unless triggered by an external source. In this case, Will assumes he's the likeliest candidate. He's aware he'd taken a few knocks when the van crashed, but Hannibal had seemed confident his head injuries were less than grave, however, he's also keenly aware that strokes are often proceeded by the smell of blood. The phenomenon is so common they've got dog's trained to sniff it out for those unlucky prone.

And then he picks up on the subtler, darker note underneath of rancid putrefaction and realizes the blood is congealed rather than fresh. Dead-man's blood. For a rough, heart-stopping minute, Will suffers a short burst of cognitive dissonance induced by panic. If he's dead, his mind has not shut-off following suit of his body. He can conceive of no worse hell than serving prisoner to his own mind in perpetuity.

Will jerks open his eyes and gasps with relief to see that he can. Remembering he's less than alone, his eyes dart self-consciously over to Hannibal. Will catches the Doctor sparing a concerned glance in his direction.

He feigns a small, tight, pacifying smile and focuses all his attention determinedly out the window at the changing landscape whirring past as their winding road curves them up along the edge of the eastern seaboard.

He watches dusk descend and the sun drop behind thick copses of towering pine jutting out every so often against dramatic outcroppings of pale limestone.

Will counts when he breathes to lower his blood pressure. He always liked the Serta commercials where the sheep all get their own numbers like football players. He's tried assigning some to his dogs, but then he realized he either needed to start falling asleep at a

count below ten or pack his bags and just move into a rescue shelter. Because yes, he's read over the municipal codes, and unless he's a licensed breeder which he refuses indignantly out of principle, he can't legally live 101 Dalmatians without violating far too many costly property laws.

The recirculated air through the vents smells a little like farm and ocean and leather upholstery and faintly of his signature 'ship on the bottle' cologne Hannibal loathes mixed with the sterile scent of disinfectant and institution-grade shaving cream. He imagines Hannibal's far more sensitive nose is less than keen on this mélange and Will finds himself grinning a little to think how eager he must be to address this issue for both of them at his nearest opportunity.

And then of course, as if he's somehow covertly discovered a way to finally read Will's mind, Hannibal takes a whiff of the air. The action is deliberate to show Will that, yes, he's noticed, and no, he isn't amused. Will smirks at the mild cringe on Hannibal's face. He knows he wants to complain but he won't. It's not that he's *too* polite-- Will's witnessed plenty of evidence to the contrary to sustain that belief--but that his pride won't allow him to dignify Will with his obvious displeasure-- just in case this somehow might please Will-- as if Will has put on the cologne just to spite him.

Which is absolutely, unreasonably illogical of him. After all, Will wants to push aside that divider between them as much as Hannibal wishes it never existed in the first place.

He doesn't know if he should explain that he tossed the bottle out and it's in fact his coat that's the offending article bearing leftovers of the scent. At any rate, he never minded the fragrance. He's not a snob. He didn't particularly care for it either, but the cloying sweetness seemed to appeal to Molly, and she's the one who purchased it for him. He'd worn it for her benefit.

Molly, *Molly.* She hangs between them like a judgmental ghost, a quintessential symbol of Will's ultimate Fuck You, Hannibal. He's not sure how long it will take for them to bury that gaff.

Will presumes what antagonizes Hannibal the most, is not that he forsook him for a Wife and a lie and a life of perpetual banality, but that Molly came as a package deal, offering the kid and the American Dream along with her. Will considers in retrospect, that it *did* serve as an acutely malicious form of punishment Hannibal sorely deserved.

He remembers the crushed, resentful expression on Hannibal's face when Will confirmed his assumptions. Yes, Hannibal had answered his wish with an offer to make a family for him once, but he had also stolen it back. Back in the day, they used to call that sort of bullshit: 'Indian Giving'.

Will knows he'll always pine for Abigail. Her loss was a terrible mistake neither will ever be able to salvage: The teacup is shattered irreparably. He'll never forgive Hannibal for it, but then he doesn't need to, her name is nearly off limit between them as of present, though he hopes one day he'll be either a strong enough or good enough man to let her name be sanctified for them instead.

They will both have to live with the tragic consequences of their horrible tangled, misunderstanding until the day they too, join her in the ground. Just the mere prospect that he's finally here with Hannibal means they both are feeling her absence more poignantly than ever. The daughter-shaped-hole between them aches and Will believes he's not alone in suffering it. But, they will grieve privately, to themselves alone until Will is... not ready to forgive Hannibal, he doubts he'll ever be capable of that, but perhaps one day they might mourn Abigail together and finally say goodbye to her sad shadow hovering between them.

Will sees Hannibal seeking his eyes in the mirror, his expression is somber. He wonders if he doesn't quite give the man enough credit for his astute powers of intuition. He suspects he may be still entertaining doubt about Will's ability to commit to this... whatever this is, whether he's up to take the plunge.

Will grants that yes, there is an obscene amount of sins stacked against each other between them that still require closure, but that will work itself out in time. They pass by a remote cottage set back nearly half an acre from the road, and the reminder leads him back around to the open case he still needs to solve.

He longs to know how the memory of his house is now haunted, and what villain stored in his brain broke loose to commit the crime. However, he's coming to partially accept that it doesn't *feel* quite like a being, so much as it feels like an absence of one.

Closing his eyes as before, he returns to the house he no longer thinks of as home. This time, however, his examination is informed and his shields are raised and firmly in place.

As before, it initially looks the same, but he won't fall for that trick a second time. But then, he opens a new can of worms. Now, the wrongness is revealed explicitly in every facet of it's conception: Every plank and panel and brick-- every bone of the foundation issues an eerie and unfamiliar aura of vapory hopelessness-- a pervasive, all-encompassing nothingness that clings to his skin like a strange permeating itch he can't quite scratch.

The stench of death is stronger than before and Will scowls, angry at how easily the sacred can be sullied. This place was meant to be maintained in good condition but somehow it's been sabotaged into this unholy bastardized version and it's a very poignant reminder of how very vulnerable-- *how fragile* the contents of his brain really are.

As it is, he walks a very thin line down a very narrow ledge and he doesn't care to fall off. His sanity is contingent on a delicate balancing act and should he stumble, all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again. Will prefers himself intact-- even if the mending job he'd attempted turned out looking a little half-assed, it's still quite prettier than the straight-jacket, padded-cell alternative he's always seemed to be headed for as if it's some kind of inevitable birthright.

He's known for awhile now that the sutures holding him together have begun to fray and the fissures are widening, but he knows a good doctor.

Will imagines Hannibal with an apron tied around his waist and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows holding needles between his lips as he tends to his project. More like a doll-maker than a coroner or surgeon, he takes his time, doting on every detail, pouring his pride into his

work. Will can see those adept, graceful hands deftly patching his holes before closing shut the gaping seams with neat, clever stitching.

The tangent is a blissful respite he intends to revisit later but now he needs to focus.

Will digs back-- digs deeper into his memory for the truth and the ghost of his old home materializes, transposing over it's current corpse. He remembers it now as it has been: steadfast. A fixture of safety. He sees the dauntless, anchored ship sheltering him from the storm waging war outside, all the nights spent protected, his dogs huddled around him. He see the never completed boat engines propped in his living room surrounded by books and trinkets and tools and heirlooms, the rickety, out-of-tune piano, the worn furniture, the cozy nook with his mother's desk with his father's tackle box tucked beneath.

The image is fleeting. He blinks and it's gone. What remains is a mocking facsimile looming before him cold and forbidding, standing vacant on it's solitary lot surrounded by acres upon acres of uninhabited fields now rendered desolate where life had once bound untamed, the very soil leached barren.

He wants to mourn, but instead, in it's place, he senses a discomfiting absence and he doesn't understand what it is. He doesn't dare step closer. Remaining on the outermost perimeter his imagination will allow for, Will maintains a wide scope of vigilance. Being intimately acquainted with the unpredictable nature of his memories, he expects treachery. He knows what malignancies lurk in the dark crevices of his mind, biding their time in the unwieldy corners.

Will is too wise to be unwary. Whatever this is, he refuses to let it take him for a fool--he refuses to afford *anyone* that judgment of himself-- even if it's only by his own self-estimation.

Fool me once, shame on me, fool me again, shame on you.

He's felt that shame in spades and has ever since firmly resolved to never repeat the experience.

Will grits his teeth in frustration though because The nothingness continues to haunt him, and the mystery of it pricks.

And then he hears a quiet whisper pressed against the shell of his ear. Will experiences a flicker of recognition and he sees himself, only much, much younger, a version of himself captured in time. The child has been errant for so long, Will had almost forgotten what he'd looked like. His face is cherubic, and he's so small, but his eyes are so much older than his scant years would suggest.

Will remembers now. He remembers being this boy. He remembers the pain of never knowing his mother, searching fruitlessly for pictures of her, pictures he never knew until he was much older that his father had long ago destroyed. He remembers being too-sensitive, knowing too much too often. He remembers the frantic desire to be accepted, the pain of countless rejections. He remembers they were afraid of him and no one would ever tell him why and when they did he learned to shut his mouth and hide his 'little trick'.

He remembers the deep, soul-crushing despair of watching his first dog die after being hit by a car that never stopped. He remembers the second dog his father took out back and shot when he grew too old and no one could afford the bills from the vet. His father told him this was how life works.

That boy was no longer *this* boy after that day.

He remembers callous words and suffering through years of disappointment, long nights waiting for his father to return home and the cold dinners and the empty cabinets. He remembers when he first truly felt resentment, collecting the empty bottles and pouring out the stash of full ones he could track down. He remembers the black eye and the time social services came but he also remembers the furious war his father waged to keep him.

He remembers punching his schoolyard tormentor unconscious one day. Not because he was angry, he accepted the futility of fighting bullies long before. No, he knocked the kid unconscious because he wanted to see what it would feel like. He liked it and didn't hide it so terribly well though he gave the story he knew the adults required to hear. He knew by now what happened to the one's who deviated like he did and he didn't have any particular interest in joining them. He was suspended for only a week that time.

No one fucked with him again though, and sometimes he secretly wished they would.

He remembers his father taking him fishing and explaining to him how the world would always fight him. The world was a hard place. That was the summer his father taught him how to 'redirect his anger and channel it, how to hunt like a man'. He never bothered correcting his old man's misapprehensions. He appreciated the lesson and there was no need. Yes. he once sought to be understood, but now he was wiser. If anyone ever knew the truth they would have good reason to be scared of him.

He remembers his first kill, the disillusioning dullness of it. He enjoyed the hunt, the sport of it, but the actual kill was lackluster. The doe's eyes shone out at him innocently and stupidly and he felt no satisfaction in taking her life. It wrenched something inside of him when the light faded from her eyes, they reminded him too much of the dogs when they died, the glassy emptiness. He despised it. Animals were better than humans. Humans were twisted, wrong. He didn't exclude himself from this assessment. He remembers after gutting her how many days after the last of the dried blood was scrubbed away from under his fingernails he still smelled it and pretended it was a someone rather than a something. He knew the thoughts were not, technically morally sound, but as long as he didn't actually follow through with it, it didn't hurt anyone to imagine it. Though their first hunt was a success, and Will pretended he enjoyed himself, and though his father certainly went hunting many times after again, he went by himself. He never again asked Will along, sure they would go fishing or fix motors up together, but Will got the impression his father was sometimes a little afraid of him too, though he'd never admit to such an emasculating truth, imagine a father, afraid of his own kid.

When the boy grew up, his gift grew with him. It overwhelmed. He removed himself from temptation because temptation was too great when he could barely keep track of where he started and any random other ended. He took his father's advice to heart finally. He finally saw it's usefulness and repurposed his gift for other's benefits. Some used him. They mostly

always did. And there was always the ridicule but it never mattered as. long. as. they. didn't. interfere.

Work, work and dogs and more work and then, some more dogs for the hell of it.

Then Hannibal.

Everything changed from that moment on.

For a moment, Will is so lost in his musings, there is moment of shock when he suddenly sees the boy materialize. He hadn't expected that.

He looks him over.

There is no aura of either good nor bad, no glow of radiance nor glitter of malevolence. He's simply there, not quite tangible, but not quite fiction either. The irony of the sheer meta existence of the boy is not lost on Will.

Will studies him and decides, yes, he's a cannon packed tight with gunpowder, but his fuse has not yet been lit.

This boy has not yet felt the beating of a heart stutter to a stop beneath his hands. This boy has not felt his fist collide with bone and feel it give way beneath his knuckles, he does not know how it feels when he hits hard enough to shatter, when the bones crunches beneath his own it or how it feels when the skin splits beneath the force, how hot and wet and satisfying the blood feels when he finally makes it surface. This boy knows little of the world and in spite of how hard the world has been to him, he still holds on tight to the little private hopes and dreams and stories of make-believe he tell himself to fall asleep at night.

Will wonders if everyone is born with this same darkness buried inside waiting for the right impetus to set it free or if he was simply born the wrong kind of person, and no matter how his life turned out he'd still have the same impulses.

When he looks at himself as this boy though, he sees in this child's wide-eyed nescience the same purity as the doe and the dogs and he thinks it must be a later onset for some. Either that, or *this* child is the child he should have been born as.

Or, he was never this child.

Or, perhaps he is still a part of him somewhere.

Will is not sure *if* or *when* or *why* he might have, long ago, intentionally sublimated this aspect of himself, nor what danger he'd conceived it posing to subject it to so long of an exile in the deepest recesses of his psyche, but now, like an archaeologist rejoicing recovery of a rare, unexpected artifact, he can't help but marvel at this unforeseen reunion.

As if he were approaching an easily spooked fawn, he approaches slowly before kneeling down to his level.

“I don't understand what you're asking of me,” Will confesses.

The over-compassionate child he once was voices again his tiny, urgent plea, petitioning for sympathy.

Listen, he begs, *listen to it.*

He knows what he's supposed to be listening for but he resists.

You have to, the child demands.

There are warning bells sounding, but their reverberations are muted by distance. Will knows it's reckless, but he reasons to himself that not all wise decisions are founded on conventional prescripts, besides, if he's going to trust anyone, there's likely few more worthy than the virtuous embodiment of his own, personal, eternally preserved innocence.

Will entertains his last ditch reservation: Playing Devil's advocate, he reminds himself how easily innocence can be mislead by corrupt influencing.

On the other hand, he sick of trying to suss out and slap away whatever hand is currently stirring his brain into soup and he considers a little guidance might point him in the right direction.

He also is keenly aware that following this figment's guidance seems to be the only way he can resolve this enigma of disappearing, morphing memories. Balls to the wall, he goes with the flow, hopping on the boat that he hopes will carry him down the river in the right direction.

It feels. It wants you to feel it, he tells Will. *It wants you to understand.*

Will listens carefully to this child --- *this mere pup still nursing at the teat*, as he artlessly anthropomorphizes the nothingness, granting it autonomy.

You are meant to.

Will gives it a try. He walks up to the house and lays his palm flat against the paint-chipped siding. He lets himself feel nothing and the moment he truly realizes he does, it snaps onto him instantly, a black parasitic entity like the murderous alien blobs from one of the old Outer Limits reruns he remembers watching when he was a kid.

There is no time to consent, nor time to occlude against the astonishing force of the invasion. The nothingness taps right into the pure core of his empathy like an opportunistic vampire sprouting malevolent roots that rip through him, spreading like wildfire, imposing over every fiber and synapse.

When the process is complete Will is a perfect mirror, reflecting the nothing he sees with what he feels inside.

It's a peaceful feeling. Dull, but not exactly boring. He imagines this is probably what death is supposed to feel like and it doesn't frighten him. There is an abyss where he supposes his emotions are supposed to be but the abyss doesn't swirl or try to swallow him. It's perfectly still, coexisting symbiotically.

Will looks at the house and removes his hand, wiping his palm off on his pants.

This house and everything it ever stood for mean nothing to him. He knows it all did once, and he'd thought it might always be a little nostalgic but now this tether is severed and this doesn't bother him. He feels nothing and he understands *why that's necessary.*

It's more than a coping mechanism, it's a by-product of his evolution.

It's forced out the old to make room for the new.

Will bends down, capturing a pinch of dirt, rubbing it between his fingers, testing it. He watches as it disintegrates into a chalky, powdery dust before blowing away, stolen by a bone-chilling gust of wind. Standing back up, he wraps his arms around himself and shivers as he peers inside through the windows and they stare back at him, dark, hollow sockets exposing the truth.

It's an empty shell. The warm, happy memories, the scared, horrible ones, all of them have fizzled out, leaving little but remnants in their wake.

He tucks away the grim, emptied vision in the back pocket of his mind where he stores the rest of the relics of his past rendered meaningless. It's like a museum in there now.

“-Forecast for tonight 57 degrees Fahrenheit, partly cloudy. Lows around 50. Southwest winds 15 to 20 miles per hour shifting to the west ...” A weather-report interrupts, jarring Will from his disjointed train of thought. The buzzing static hurts his head, and without bothering to announce any reason for it, he punches off the radio and stares back outside. Hannibal doesn't complain, and if he's irritated, he's decided it's not worth a petty spat.

Between the passing trees, Will catches intermittent glimpses of the coast giving forth to a blur of remote, sprawling beaches. Tiredly rolling his head to the side, he rests his cheek against the cool window and quickly the glass by his mouth steams over into white oval of fog.

He draws a lazy smiley face before wiping down the small area with his coat sleeve.

Will dares a discreet glance sideways at Hannibal. His attention is directed ahead at the road, but Will still catches the tiny curling at the corners of his lips betray him before he can seal back up his expression.

He's amused. *Will* has amused him.

Will's heart bounces lightly in his chest and he hides his grin back out the window. He knows they have to be there any minute, the ten minutes 'promised' had come and gone over five minutes ago.

He distracts himself to quell his excitement by watching the teeny little silhouettes of gulls slicing through streaks of vast gold-infused clouds. Naturally, his eyes wander to the edge of the horizon. The atmosphere pinches the spectrum at the arc where the world drops off to

more world leaving behind a thin strip of technicolor ribbon between the coupling point of sky and water.

Hypnotized by the the image, Will closes his eyes but he no longer sees the forsaken house from before. Instead, the idea of home reinvents itself in a flourishing palette of colors, constructing with zeal, brick by brick an evolving blueprint. He hums a wistful sigh too quiet to be overheard and questioned after by anyone listening too closely.

Will allows the tapestry to weave itself organically and without inhibition, secretly cultivating a fantasy of their shared life together that seems so intimate, he can barely think very long on the subject before feeling too warm around the collar.

Inspiration fuels his creativity and Will sees the intricate details and varieties of patterns work around and through and between each other and he thrills when he realizes what he's catching a glimpse of-- it's *their design. His and Hannibal's.*

Anticipation growls hungry in the pit of Will's gut as his mind paints a picture of fresh-linens and home-cooked meals and easy days spent relaxing after nights crafted to give reason for their days.

He imagines breathing in the fragrant air drifting to him from the kitchen, suffused with the aroma of freshly snipped herbs simmering in a pot on the stove. A soft light filters in through sheer, flowing curtains, its mellow rays glow across the floor. Will slips a hand beneath the politely pulled up comforter on the other side of the bed to feel the sheets. He finds they still retain a small amount of heat of their recently vacated *regular* occupant so he rolls over to soak up the rest of it, burying his nose into the plush pillow to inhale the leftover scent of sleep-warmed skin and clean hair.

The whole vision is so cringingly domestic, so agonizingly tantalizing, Will can barely believe he's given his fantasies permission to roam as far as they have, especially considering the star featured in them is sitting right next to him at the same time.

Hannibal gently clears his throat, signaling for his attention. Will quickly auditions his expression in the side-view mirror and deems it passable enough. Peering up at Hannibal, Will attempts mild interest, pretending he hasn't almost been caught paying too close attention to him for a solid past few minutes.

“We're now crossing over the property-line,” he explains, nodding toward a small, indistinctive sign-post with a lot number notched into the metal plate.

Will smiles and he can feel how awkward it must look, some mix between overly eager and suave nonchalance that fits in just as poorly with his typical personality as forcing a square peg in a round hole.

It's not even a good copy of anyone else he's met, and he can tell instantly by the amused, exasperated look on Hannibal's face he's blown this one.

“Not convinced?”

“Not even slightly,” Hannibal smirks.

He figures he's already made an ass of himself, so why not go balls to the wall.

He pulls a wide, cheesy grin that makes the Doctor genuinely laugh, and at least it's not entirely out of pity.

“Will,” Hannibal says, his tone sobering, “I know we have lost the easy rapport we had once. I cherished the memory of that these last 3 years. The memory of how you were when we used to talk in earnest. I want you to feel like you can be genuine with me.”

Will sighs as he runs a thumb inside the collar of his shirt to make space for his hand to slip beneath. Rubbing out a cramping knot in the back of his neck, he glances at Hannibal. “Okay.”

Hannibal snorts softly.

“Okay,” he parrots back. His expression closing to Will.

“I don't want to believe it entirely,” he blurts out, struggling to salvage this and inadvertently giving away too much at the same time. “I don't usually get to keep the things I want.”

Will thinks perhaps he may have sounded a little too raw. A little *too* angry. But then, Hannibal evidently wants him to be 'genuine' and genuine Will has always been a little too angry and a little too honest.

Hannibal's eyes shine back at him, and he can't quite read the emotions. There are many of them.

“Thank you,” he says softly.

Will isn't sure what that means specifically, but he supposes he did perhaps finally give him the confirmation he's needed. Hannibal's not exactly a stupid man, and he's positive he's worked out the not so subtle subtext of what he's saying-- in every nuance and every capacity, of course, because Hannibal's ego is a bit inflated and he'll fish out every compliment from Will he can.

Hannibal seems to feed off of Will's approval in a way Will has never quite understood. It flattering, though... and a little intimidating. But somehow, he doesn't ever fail to live up to whatever extreme and mercurial standards he's held to, and that's at least, some small relief.

If he's honest with himself, it thrills him a little to realize the extent of the power he wields over this larger-than-life personality.

Will wonders how much of this Hannibal purposefully metes out to him, and how much is purely an incidental ramification of his *fondness* for Will. He can't help but think, if their roles were reversed he would resent him a little for it. A man like Hannibal, does not part with the control he's master of so comfortably.

“Sveiki. Welcome,” Hannibal announces as they pull up at long last to his elegant cliff-side dacha. “Shall we head in right away to tend to your unfortunate damages or would you care for an exterior tour first?”

Will glances around and his eyes settle on the cliff hanging over the shore. He feels drawn to it as if he's half-remembering a dream, has woken and clung to the cusp of it, and then proceeded to fall back again into it's twilight.

He barely realizes he's followed it's pull toward the edge until he's standing at it. He peers down at the drop. It's far, perhaps too far to survive, but if he had a proper start he could easily clear the jutting rocks down below. For a moment, the surf slapping against the wall captures him and Will wonders if he could be reborn from the seafoam, or if it would only make him into myth like Aphrodite.

Will feels Hannibal's presence behind him and ponders asking him if he thinks he might jump. He's not sure he wasn't about to when he thinks about it, and for both their sake, takes a step back.

“The bluff is eroding,” he hears Hannibal say. “There was more land when I was here with Abigail. More land still when I was here with Miriam Lass.”

Will's jaw clenches as he stares out at the broad expanse of the Atlantic and then he feels Hannibal just behind him and the gentle, securing press of a palm cupped over his shoulder.

“Now you're here with me, and the bluff is still eroding,” Hannibal intones turning Will around to face him. Their eyes connect and lock together and Will doesn't dare to breathe. “You and I are suspended over the rolling Atlantic.”

His hands drop from Will's arms and he turns to head down the path leading back to the entrance. He means for Will to follow him, and obediently, he does.

“Soon all of this will be lost to the sea,” he hears Hannibal say finally, but it's so quiet, he thinks for a minute, he might have only been speaking to himself.

Chapter 8

'Soon all of this will be lost to the sea.'

Hannibal's nihilistic forecast lingers, the words hanging heavy in the air for too long after they've been uttered. They cling like a sticky itch affixing to a persistent tug, towing Will back while Hannibal carries forward, unmindful of the ghost he'd hatched and carelessly abandoned behind him. Left alongside Will, the grasping, grabby-handed thing finds purchase and wheedles it's way in, taking quick root in the rich, newly fertilized soil.

The field had been too recently gleaned, farmed too hard too often and the ground was nearly leeched. It was left unsown which meant it was vulnerable, but it was meant to sit idle. It was meant to recover and be eventually reclaimed by it's rightful owner. Will was eager for the privacy, eager to turn over and till and seed the garden to his own specifications. He yearned to see what happened when the new growth blossomed unfettered.

He was tired of the vandalism, tired of seeing his flowers trampled every time he let in a stranger because they never came by themselves. Every instance Will shared his brain it tore the gap a little further open and there was never enough time to let it reseal before he was called on to do it again. In every interim, he stood lone a tired and frail sentry, too easy to trick and creep past and he was tired of stumbling into insidious pockets of stowaways.

At some point he remembers he meant to install the high fences and barbed-wire around the slow-healing wound, but he never did and there was nothing to deter another invasion.

And then, his luck being very slim, mere minutes ago when Will stood upon the crumbling ledge peering down, a fresh assault besieged him, erupting up in a fountain like a bursting geyser from the tumbling depths.

Blindsided and nearly knocked over the lip by his own surprise slamming into him with the force of a wrecking ball, his immediate concern was focused only on keeping his footing. He didn't have the presence of mind to care about the aftermath that would shortly follow, but now, in retrospect, the unexpected twist suddenly occurs to Will: this attack was inborn; organized inside his own mind and warehoused there on reserve, waiting for the right time to present itself.

Of course, the initial shock wore off quickly, but still, as Will looked at the landscape, he was aghast to find he recognized it-- it was inexact in it's entirety, but there were aspects within the details; the remotest minutia that sourced itself from the incidental, popping out at him in sharp contrast too obvious to miss.

Each significant, tiny glint triggered various fragments of a very specific, single memory and like a shattered mirror, every corresponding shard reflected back a near perfect replica of it's real-life counterpart.

Will spared a few, serious seconds racking his brain for it's origin. If he could find it, he could see the whole picture and use it as a frame of reference for comparison-- just to make sure he

was really seeing what he was seeing and this wasn't all just some mere coincidental resemblance.

He fumbled together what he could, but there was still too much missing and too many dim halls cluttered by too many possibilities of latent compartments where they could easily be lost and even if he had all the memory contained and at hand, it's been splintered into too many pieces to sift through. While it was disappointing to call off the search, he accepted the task was not vitally urgent, content to revisit it later, but then, Hannibal spoke and his premonition provoked it's instant revival.

He submits to his curiosity, stopping before the open gate of the side-garden. His feet planted on soft earth is a grounding sensation, that enables him better clarity. Will turns back around to glance at the cliff's edge behind him, seeking again the flicker of recognition strained from it's ambiguity, daring it to exist.

It still does, but this isn't a shock because he's already experienced it the first go-around.

Closing his eyes against what he's just observed a second time, the image augmented by a wider panorama, he fishes back out what he's got of it's doppleganger. When he reopens and sets the two images side-by-side, he expects there will be no further duplications. This will prove the landscape benign and he can excuse the confusion as a crossed wire knocked loose from the hit to his head writing off the rest as a fluke.

When he reopens his eyes for real, the fictional cliff's edge persists in an after-image he allows to transpose over it's reality, but the two are nearly identical and Will doesn't like the conclusion this draws; it's too portentous and too real a harbinger.

And aside from the fact that Will is now, in a very real way scared of the cliff, there is also the pervasive dread that his fate and Hannibal's are inescapably linked to it no matter what he does.

For someone who guards his personal autonomy as jealously as Will, the notion of being yoked to Fate is a restrictive terror far worse than his fear of falling or drowning.

He reminds himself that his brain is forever broken and therefore an unreliable test of the truth. This comforts him. Still, he's mad at himself for wasting time humoring this foolishness. But then he recalls that Hannibal was the one who inspired him. He'd witnessed Will's daze as he stood looking out over the water. He might have made the association and have intentionally engineered what he'd said with some, well-shrouded purpose in mind and although this is a harsh presumption to make, it's neither an unfair nor unfounded one. If it's true, whatever Hannibal's motivation, whose ever benefit it's for, it still brands him a class-A asshole, because even if he meant well, it hasn't exactly achieved the desired effect.

On the other hand, if his aim *was* really to rattle Will, he's succeeded-- though if *this* is true, it seems awfully counter-intuitive to his interests—specifically, his interest in fostering Will's trust, because currently, he's doing an unimpressive job inspiring it and if this is the method he's chosen to adhere to, he's certainly approaching his goals from a baffling angle. It would not surprise Will, obviously, he knows the man too well. There is little outside the realm of his capacity that limits his decisions.

Will has seen a broad scope of Hannibal's subterfuge: his petty deceptions, his important deceptions and all the other ones in between. It's all a little game he likes to play and he's very talented at it.

When he envisions an outcome he'd like to produce, the routes he takes to achieve it are reliably wild and unwieldy to the outside perspective and the uniformed eye and therefore, cannot be readily anticipated. When he wishes to present an idea, it always sounds crisp and newly conceived to his audience but Will knows they're only processed to look that way. In reality, the plans are always crafted long in advance.

Will's aches, feeling gouged and it takes a second to realize why. Running along this train of thought for so long is lending it too much, unfair credit which is, in return, debiting Hannibal, indicting him without evidence.

He can't believe how quickly he's slipped back into his old patterns. But then, hating Hannibal and finding reasons to sustain that hate has always been easier than allowing himself to think about the too many ways he didn't-- that had always shifted a little to close to identifying what he felt, and that was something not allowed.

Will looks for an impression, something to work from, something that will exonerate or convict Hannibal but he can glean very little.

Nothing hinders his gait nor hesitates his pace. He is neither indifferent nor intentionally neutral, instead, there is no glimmer of any comprehension that he's even been placed into trial. His is motive and agenda free and it's as if not a thing has or could alter the pristine condition of his conscience-- *if he has one.* Will doubts Hannibal would scorn the halo rewarded and feels his hands closing into fists at his sides. He clenches them tightly to suppress the shaking.

Will is angry. Granted, he's pleased Hannibal isn't toying with him, but he's rankled by his lack of consideration; as if he's forgotten ever having made his last remark and as if he hasn't spared a second thought since to it's impact. Without ownership, there can be no accountability and this nullifies any accusation Will wants to sling at him, guilty or not.

When he catches up to Hannibal, he doesn't notice, and Will intuits that by all appearances, he never registered his brief absence in the first place. He's continued on the same steady pace the entire time, never sensing the expanding distance stretching between them. Will doesn't know why exactly this bothers him as much as it does and he slows to a stop before the perimeter of decorative pavers tastefully framing the patio. His eyes catch on the tastefully arranged plantingS, slightly overgrown from neglect but no less pleasant for it. He can see in through the tall windows the elegant furnishing inside, and he thinks that everything Hannibal touches, save exception for himself, whom he barely touches at all, seems tasteful, and the unwelcome thought appearing from thin air for no reason at all other than to taunt him, strikes deep. He collects the tattered remains of his self-esteem and he knows deep down why he's *really* angry, and though it's because of Hannibal, it isn't truly at him --as a small part of him wishes it was.

Because that would make it easier.

He's scared. He is scared that his remembered dream is an omen. He's scared that Hannibal's soft assessment at the end is the supplementary proof. He is scared that they have some cosmic stamp branding their convergence, dooming it before it can be realized.

What makes it bearable, is when Hannibal turns back around to check Will's progress and returns the 20 feet back across the patio to retrieve him.

“Get out of your head and come inside, Will,” he instructs, exasperated but patient and incredibly fond.

What makes it worthwhile is the warm press of his hand on the small of Will's back as he ushers him inside with him, and from thereon, how he never moves further outside their little merged bubble of space more than a step or two at a time.

Chapter 9

A child ventures into a basement. The light-switch doesn't work, so he takes his flashlight. He's already taken several steps in when the batteries die and his only illumination flickers out. Instantly, he is profoundly aware that he's alone in the dark and an otherness wakes from the encloaking blackness, as if it too, in turn, senses him. The shadows become liquid, shifting and unfolding, sinister but ambiguous, as if the predator hasn't yet decided in what manner it should capture it's prey. The unknown is perceived by instinct as dangerous: the rabbit sees a rustling from the bushes and flees back to it's hollow: the boy races back up the steps as if he's being pursued, his heart hammering in his chest and slams shut the door behind him.

Will finds he can breathe again once he's crossed the threshold. Inside, the walls of the house are a barricade, keeping out what hunts him and this space provides a cushioner, fortified by Hannibal's almost custodial proximity. However, he adjusts for the fact that this may only be an illusion of safety.

Whatever terror-- whatever deeply-seated insecurity that had been dredged up and gripped Will so thoroughly, is only now beginning to release him from it's clutches, but there is a resistance from the talons, as if his fear is a newly-trained falcon; reluctant to surrender it's first kill to it's trainer.

Will is keenly aware that his pride and his faith in the integrity of his mind isn't so resilient. He knows, that though it would be a relief to prove that what he most fears has no substance, no real foundation, it will also be another blow, another set-back.

Still, he dares a backward glance out the window. The motion is too quick and the world topples over a little on it's axis. For a second, everything is a swaying, hazy fuzz. When it stills and refocuses, Will takes into account that the yet untended blow to his head, though lending a surreal quality to his vision, does not, however, impair his overall cognition; his ability to discern the truth from what he sees: the tranquil landscape is oblivious; chaste and inert: the cliff exists as it has for millenia and does not long to tip him over it's edge. The ocean sparkles and isn't hungry to swallow him up into it's depths.

Yet, there exists a remaining, straggling sense of strange recognition, and yes, that bothers him, but it doesn't seem like it wants to mean anything and then, turning back to reexamine Hannibal, here too, is an unporous and kosher fixture. Ultimately, there is nothing Will can find indicative of deceit inveterate from any source other than that contrived of his own machination.

Will rubs a hand over his face and sighs. The revelation is disappointing but again, not unexpected.

“Have a seat, and put this on your head,” Hannibal instructs, handing him an ice-pack freshly retrieved from the freezer. Will avoids eye-contact when he accepts the pouch and imagines

Hannibal frowning at him. Uttering a 'thanks' for the sake of pacification, he does as he's told, pressing the compress gingerly against the raised goose-egg on the back of his skull. He winces at the immediate icy shock, but as the cold permeates, it gradually begins to alleviate the constant crowning ache increasingly clouding the corners of his vision.

After a minute of convalescence, he retries his sight. Seated across from him but sparing him his privacy, Hannibal's gaze is settled patiently upon his own hands folded neatly on the table in front of him. Will, pleased to find he's recovered a semblance of clarity, feels no longer constrained to staring at the safe vignettes of the wood-grain patterning the surface of the table-top and takes a sweeping glance around at his new surroundings. The open kitchen is simpler in it's appointments than he expects his host prefers but no less elegant.

The kitchen is the heart of the home after all, and to Hannibal, has always been a vital station to his work. Though, he thinks if this house were any less isolated, he would probably prefer a more private lay-out. Instead, the kitchen transitions organically into a sprawling den furnished comfortably around a rustic, stone-and-mortar fireplace built up to the open rafters of the high ceiling. The sun, slim on the horizon, casts it's last glow, pouring down through wide skylights, and Will's eyes search the rows upon rows of books housed in the recessed shelving encompassing the room, amazed by the expansive library.

Finally, his gaze lands back by the hearth to a brass bucket of parched, pale kindling, hewn too long ago to serve any enduring flame and this, just nearly dismissed detail extinguishes the cozy picture, reminding Will of when Hannibal had last paid a visit.

Abigail's ghost sits immersed by the warmth of a roaring fire, sipping tea and reading a book, blissfully unaware that her lazy days as a kept and cosseted pet would soon come to an end.

“I see her, too,” Hannibal utters softly.

“I wish--”, Will starts, but can't find the words to complete.

“I wish, too.”

There is a surprising lack of that old, grudging anger Will is accustomed to suffering. Instead, in it's absence, there is only lingering cinders of sadness. The shared regret, the shared sorrow hovers over them, suspended for a deferential stretch until it's outstayed it's visit. For now, they've spared Abigail the appropriate moment of mourning she deserves, and though there is so much more they owe her, Will clears away the tightness from his throat and blinks, unwilling to shed the tears stinging his eyes because languishing on his loss and prolonging their combined misery is selfish and counterproductive and won't bring her back. They can't afford to stagnate in the quagmire of their collective mistakes made in previous lives. Time cannot be reversed but time can delay, and Will is aware that, intrinsic to present circumstances, is an order or priorities that forces due a certain level of respect.

“Is there a time frame?” He asks.

“Tomorrow night,” Hannibal answers succinctly.

“That's generous.”

“It's not for our benefit. The Dragon can only absorb spoils won fairly.”

Will muses over this. “So he gives us a moment recovery. We give him the arena and the proper fight he wants. It still won't be a fair fight.”

Hannibal studies Will, curious for elaboration.

“He considers you currently, his match. A monster equal to his.”

Hannibal does not flinch at the implication-- how easily Will assigns him this comparison, how easy it rolls off his tongue, because even if it's intended as an expression from another's view, it's not entirely that, and they both can hear it.

“Do you see me as a monster, Will?”

“Yes.” The response is honest, supplied without hesitation.

“Do you see yourself as one?”

“In the past, only by viewing myself in your reflection. Presently? There is only the untested possibility.”

“It doesn't scare you,” Hannibal conjectures.

“I'm ambivalent.”

“You're inured.”

Will agrees. “By now? Probably.”

“If I'm his match, then you're my advantage. It's unfair.”

“Yes, it would be. But he thinks I'm impartial. He probably thinks I'm your captive.” Will chuckles. “He might be enjoying the idea of becoming a hero. Rescuing the 'damsel in distress' is quite the conceit.”

“Typically, the knight and the dragon are not interchangeable. Besides, you're hardly a 'damsel' and I sincerely hope you're not 'distressed'. Also, might I add that you you don't give your self-worth due credit,” Hannibal argues, “It's likely you'd make a fine addition.”

Will concedes his point. “I'm an ancillary prize.”

“He would know of us,” Hannibal points out.

Will snorts at this. “To an outside perspective I should despise you.”

“To an outside perspective, it's a commonly entertained thought to the contrary. Also, may I remind you that we are, by recognized, official consent, colluding against him.”

Will smirks. “He's been led to believe I'm anything but your friend, Hannibal.”

“Has he?”

“I've ensured it.”

“And you were the one who pointed him in my direction,” he surmises.

“Who else?”

More to the point, *how else*? How else could Will have arranged the pieces to fall the way they needed to?

Though Hannibal is now in on the joke, his reaction is vacant of humor. “You were very convincing.”

Will hears the double-meaning immediately and feels himself grinding his teeth. “Doubt is an insistent mistress.”

“She's a third-wheel between us,” Hannibal agrees.

“One that continues to persist.”

“Why shouldn't she?”

“You know why it won't be a fair fight? Because you have an edge. *We* have an edge,” Will demands, “Because, I *am* your bulwark.”

Hannibal leans back in his chair, smiling distantly back at him. “My enemy's enemy is my friend.”

“A lie can travel half-way around the world while truth is putting on it's shoes. I can't force you to believe me.”

“Men trust their ears less than their eyes.”

Will is frustrated, but he still laughs, delighted by the quick rebuttal. “You make a valid argument,” he admits.

“I usually do,” Hannibal grins, his tone verging on flirtation.

“Some people would call that arrogance.”

“Haven't you read Frederick's book? It's a best-seller, you know.”

“I'm sure you must be just as proud of that as he is.”

“Ah, yes, infamy. Because any publicity is good publicity. He depicts me as a narcissist. Arrogance and pride are a natural consequence of my defect,” Hannibal replies sardonically.

“Woe to your unblemished reputation for modesty among the politer circles. But then, there came a very clear day for me when I was no longer a part of that circle,” Will points out.

“Your overtures were less than subtle.”

It's a bold thing to bring light to, but he does so unblushing.

“Forced confession gives diminishing return,” Hannibal warns in a carefully measured tone, “It spoils the pleasure of the surprise, where learning patiently the answer through evidence is vastly more rewarding.”

There is nothing ambiguous in his meaning. Hannibal is deliberately and overtly flirting with him. Will is rendered speechless.

“And you, Will, are *in love* with that pleasure,” he asserts, choosing his words with specific intention, words he knows draw inevitable associations, placing his inflections where he wants to call for explicit emphasis.

Will narrows his eyes, unsure if Hannibal is asking him a question, making fun of him or making an offer.

“I suspect my pleasure won't suffer either way,” he replies returning with a challenge.

“After today's tumult, I think we'd both find pleasure in a good night's sleep."

It's hard to parse the underlying meaning from Hannibal's reply.

He doesn't duck out and he doesn't demur, and Will doesn't think the man intends to string him on for his own amusement, but this is a deflection and it does take the wind out of his sails a little.

The one aspect that saves him from discouragement is knowing Hannibal. He is very aware his companion enjoys playing the long game, drawing things out until they're taut and ready to snap, and when he allows it to, the climax is exquisite.

Will's attention hauls to Hannibal's hand tugging open the collar of his uniform.

“Not much was invested in a proper pallet. Three years feel longer when you sleep on less than two inches of styrofoam. Alana stole her vengeance in petty recompense. It's will be a luxury to have back a good bed tonight.”

Bed. Singular. No mention of one to spare his guest. Will knows there is one. It's former occupant is dead.

He doubts Hannibal would be so cruel as to inflict that kind of morbid torture on him. He hopes there will be an alternative provision because he doesn't dare hope to share.

“'What light is to the eyes and what air is to the lungs'...” Hannibal sighs, rolling his shoulders forward to ease the stiffness in his back. The quote, spoken mostly to himself, drifts away from him half-way through; superfluous for the evidence written in his expression. '*What love is to the heart, so is liberty to the soul of man,'* Will completes silently, watching as his companion shuts his eyes and drops back his head, drawing in a deep, restorative breath.

Air fills Hannibal's lungs, expanding his chest as he stretches, pulling taut the fabric of his uniform to reveal the sweeping plains and bluffs of his undiminished form underneath. Every under-taxed, long-deprived cell and fiber of every muscle and sinew vibrates with stirring energy as he wakes from dormancy. Even the tensed lines etched in his face lift as he emcees in the first blush of his freedom like a wolf reemerging from his den after a long winter.

The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty.

Liberty for wolves is death to the lambs: Will can already conger the clutter of carnage in the wake of the slaughter to come. The wolf is awake and hungry, his muzzle is off and from experience, he knows too well that his bite is worse than his bark. He's trained soft many dogs bred hard-mouthed to maim and mangle but he pays due diligence to the nature that nature intends and recognizes his limits. The wolf is not a dog and should not be tamed.

Will knows he has the capacity to assert influence, to infringe and manipulate, to twist and change; he's learned this art from the master himself and with Hannibal's chin tilted up like this, Will's eyes can easily trace over the bared length of his throat. It is no unwitting display. Hannibal is *allowing* Will to see him like this, stripped of his 'person-suit' as a gift; a gesture of the trust that they're working to build. He *wants* Will's eyes to flicker over the rippling protrusion of his larynx, framed by the jutting distention of tendons until he finds the shadow in the hollow where his life pumps strong but fragile, so close to the surface beneath so thin a layer of skin and Will knows it's Hannibal's own, non-verbal way of proving to him that he's willing to redistribute the balance of power between them.

It's no mean charity, spitefully re-gifted.

Will knows he won't be given another chance if he fucks up again, but he has no desire to spoil the gift the way he has in the past and the way he easily could again. Will holds an extra weight and he could easily tip the scales in either direction. It's precisely why Hannibal is wary.

Will knows which way he'd prefer the scale tips.

Hannibal is the purest and most fully realized creature he has ever met and before this frightened him; before he cringed away from it, not understanding it because he'd never been able to muddle through the murky waters of his own soul to see it in himself. Now, *he sees* and is awed.

Will's eyes remain fixed to Hannibal's hand, riveted by the nimble efficiency of his fingers effortlessly popping loose the row of buttons down the placket of his jumper. Will watches almost hypnotized as one-by-one, they open. Once the top portion is released, it's shrugged to his waist. Hannibal kicks off his shoes and stands, pushing back his chair before pulling the uniform down to his ankles with the bored, over-practiced ease and distaste of a man too used to one, sad outfit. Stepping out of it, he discards the garment on the floor.

Will's brain short-circuits a little the moment he moves to yank his undershirt off over his head in a single, swift, unfettered motion and can't help but squirm with self-conscious

embarrassment, unsure of whether he's merely an incidental audience or this is a performance; a strange, unromantic strip-tease.

Hannibal's expression is indifferent. There is no compunction for modesty, as if Will may as well be as uninterested or as uninteresting as any other insentient fixture in the room.

“When I was a surgeon, I used the exact brand of soap they supplied me with in my cell. The sterile smell combined with the hecatomb of the operating table is forever linked for me,” he hears Hannibal say as he reseats himself. Will is only half-listening as his eager eyes roam over the exposed plains of his body.

He is aware he's doing nothing to mask his interest, but then, he supposes he's volunteered himself to Will's scrutiny.

Hannibal's native brawn appears to have mostly endured, but, preserved against atrophy by artificial means, it's redistributed, smoothed the angular sharpness of his strength into sweeping, athletic bluffs.

Where once he was a finely-honed machine built for a specific purpose, now the purpose is gentled and generalized.

“It's repugnant, unpalatable,” Hannibal explains, “And I can't stomach the idea of sharing our first meal together here without washing it off of me first.”

“A shower would be nice,” Will hears himself say distractedly. Feeling Hannibal's eyes on him, he glances away, casting his gaze down to the tiny tremble of his hands clenching his knees under the table.

“For the sake of shortening time between now and fixing supper, it would be more efficient for you to join me.”

This successfully achieves it's desired effect, harnessing Will's undivided attention.

He gapes awkwardly, stunned by the invitation; barely able to comprehend what type of offer it is.

“I-- I can wait, after-- before bed-” he stumbles out ungracefully, floundering.

Hannibal's raised eyebrow and half-amused expression is no comfort.

“I wanted to refrain from coming off as rude, Will, but I find your particular fragrance almost equally unpalatable.”

It's an easy, convenient excuse, and they both know it. The approach is conspicuously forward, and there is nothing remotely naive about it.

Hannibal stands once again and pushes his chair in neatly before turning to stroll leisurely out of the kitchen. He expects Will will follow, but he doesn't expect it to be immediate.

Slowly, dry-mouthed and shaky, he pushes himself out of his seat and follows.

Will, still fully dressed stands in the furthest corner of the bathroom after Hannibal shuts the door gently behind them, as if aware that if he makes any too sudden of a motion he might frighten away his reticent guest. It's considerate, because Will feels himself vibrating with an anxiety too visible and too keenly felt to quell.

This is not how he'd envisioned being naked in front of Hannibal. He'd barely allowed himself to envision it in the first place outside of tiny glimmers of consideration to bring himself over the edge when he was alone. Tucking himself against the wall, he wonders if he could sink through it and disappear. He prays Hannibal won't remember he's there, terrified he will change his mind and evict him at the last second and equally terrified he won't.

He's never been shy with any previous lovers. But Hannibal is not just anyone. Hannibal's not even exactly his lover. Whatever they're meant to be defies identity. Whatever this is meant to be defies identification.

Will doesn't watch Hannibal strip the rest of the way down and waits until he closes the shower door behind him before he even begins to pull off his first layer. With shaking hands he steps out of his boxers, laying them on the pile with the rest of his clothing beside Hannibal's on the marble counter by the sink.

His fingers tremble as they close around the handle. Struggling to overcome his reluctance, a fierce internal battle wages and he nearly turns tail and runs the opposite direction. But then, his exhaustion wins out. He's defeated and by the same token he's triumphed.

Opening the door, a burst of steam puffs out at him as Will steps into the blanketing warmth of the spray.

There is no interchange of words and Will gives Hannibal privacy, whether he desires it or not. He casts his eyes down to the tile following the water as it cascades in a race toward the center before spiraling down the drain.

He's hyper-aware of himself, every nerve on high-alert. Hannibal's elbow brushes his chest, and he flinches back, startled. He wonders after, as he reaches for a bottle of shampoo from the rack if the contact was intentional: a means to bridge the gap. Beneath his wet lashes, his curious eyes wander up toned legs to their target.

His timid glance is fleeting and just as quickly diverts away. Hannibal, even quiescent, is... *nobly* endowed. His uncircumcised length does not cause Will any jab to his own ego, but his girth is impressive.

Mouth gone dry, his eyes crawl back up for a second peek, able to hold it longer this time he watches it fill some and finds his own member respond in kind.

It occurs to him he's been caught. Darting a quick sideways glance up at his companion, Hannibal catches his gaze with a calm, openly accepting, unfazed smile and returns to his own washing. Behind the consent, there is also approval, and Will realizes he must have done his own examination. It hardly had to be discreet the way he'd been avoiding Hannibal's eyes before now-- he'd certainly given him, however unintentionally, ample opportunity.

The realization lends him courage and more daring now, he looks over Hannibal with undisguised fascination. His body is a biographical map of experiences. His physique boasts vitality, a masculinity Will has rarely found so appealing but Hannibal is like artwork to him. When he peers back up once again, Hannibal's gaze is shuttered and his lips are slightly parted, as if Will's perusal had been carried out by touch rather than sight, as if his hands had swept over all the parts of him only his eyes had dared to explore.

Will feels himself hardening fully. However, although he's incredibly aroused by the vibrant, electric current between them, he doesn't feel any particular urgency to act on it and Hannibal gives no sign that he means to either.

This is about discovery: a gentle introduction, a preface-- a promise for something further in the future.

Taking the last step forward to move beside his companion into the direct stream from the shower-head is no longer an insurmountable goal to achieve. Their arms brush and their hips bump together and he revels in the connection. Beneath the hot water, his muscles untense and his shoulders relax; the stress from the day evaporating into the steam.

Will is cognizant of Hannibal's fixed focus, and after rinsing away the rest of the suds from his hair, he glances back over. His companion's expression is heated with more than appreciation.

There is unmistakable, unabashed lust. And it's so overwhelming, Will has to look away, but from the corner of his vision, he watches Hannibal's head tilt back and his eyes fall closed.

He watches, amazed, as his companion's hand drifts down from his chest to palm his cock. He hears them both groan softly as his hand slides over the swollen head, popping it out from it's hood to thumb over the slit before wrapping a loose fist around his shaft. He squeezes, giving himself one, single langourous pump and then releases himself unspent, but Will is melting from the inside out; his chest is heaving and his heart is fluttering and his own cock is so impossibly hard he thinks he might burst untouched.

And then, before the situation escalates, he's aware of Hannibal shifting away, stepping behind him, and for a second, he thinks he's about to get out and Will finds himself confused as to whether he's relieved or deeply depressed that this moment is ending too soon or simply frustrated by the loss of contact, but then, he feels the full length of Hannibal's body press down the back of the full length of his own and the sensation is transformative.

Hannibal's hand snakes around to his belly, resting over the scar. His lips briefly rest against the nape of his neck and Will shudders as he feels his hard cock nestle firmly against the crack of his ass. Will's nerve-endings spark on fire and the tightly coiled spring low in the core of his groin is ready to pop; it takes almost nothing to push him the rest of the way over the edge.

In the same instant he feels Hannibal's hot breath over his throat, and the backs of his knuckles inadvertently brush his straining erection, Will is overcome. Rocked by the powerful waves of his orgasm rolling through him, his cock juts thick strands of his release: over his belly, over Hannibal's hand resting on his belly, and over the tile in front of him too.

After the after-shocks subside and he recovers his bearings, Will blinks in a daze, and realizes Hannibal has already stepped out and he's slightly ashamed to have finished so barely touched and he's not even sure if his partner finished himself or if he's currently sporting his frustration outside the stall in the cold air, and *God, he's probably deciding this was a mistake.*

This was unanticipated and too soon and he didn't do it right and so of course Hannibal is already nearly fully dressed by the time Will finally steps from the shower stall to follow suit.

As he's drying off, his companion barely spares him a passing glance and Will feel the full weight of insecurity pushing down on him. He pulls on a fresh robe and with haste, quickly closes the tie with a fierce knot.

And then, before he loses his composure completely, Hannibal is beside him. The palm of one hand rests on the small of his back, the other cups his jaw and his warm lips press against the shell of Will's ear as if he's going to tell him a secret.

“The Paleothic hunters who painted the unsurpassed animal murals on the ceiling of the cave at Altamira had only rudimentary tools. Of all the priceless, perfectly crafted instruments I possess, I could not have painted a creature that surpasses your sublimity.”

Chapter 10

They return to the table in the kitchen when they are dried and clothed as if compelled by what remains in their recently vacated chairs and the stretch of the table's surface between them: some unfinished business, an unanswered question, whatever it is they both respond to its call.

Will's eyes pass over the damp fringe of Hannibal's bangs hanging just over the ridge of his brow and down to the flash of pink as his tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip. They arrive back up to meet his with more honesty this time.

He finds Hannibal has already been watching him steadily and for longer.

“What?”

“Are you hungry?”

“I was? But not really right now.”

“Nervous energy.”

“Something like that,” Will replies. “Penny for your thoughts.”

"Miserly exchange rate," Hannibal criticizes, pausing a moment before answering. “I was thinking that you and I are binary stars-- spiraling in a satellite around each other, long fixed in an inescapable orbit. How strangely fortunate yet frustrating it is that our convergence has been impeded; constrained to this singular course-- but still, is at least, locked together.”

“Why?” Will interjects, truly curious. “If you look at us, we're not exactly similar.”

“From the surface? No,” Hannibal agrees. “But you're searching for a relatable connection based on a basic, conventional model.”

Will holds up his hand, stopping him. “No. We both already know we're as different as night and day, etcetera, etcetera. *That* list goes *on and on*. I have more than a rudimentary understanding of psychology, *Doctor,*” he defends impatiently. “You disservice me by underestimating me. I know you know better.”

Hannibal lowers his gaze along with his chin in deference. “My estimation was inadequate,” he concedes before glancing back across at Will with every ounce of curiosity weighing heavy in his scrutiny. “I know you know better, too. You know I don't underestimate you. You don't make allowance for that, Will. No matter who is culpable, you bring them to charge. You *delight* turning every oversight, every misapprehension over on it's head. I find that determination refreshing. You keep me sharp: accountable professionally. It's one of many aspects of your character I appreciate. In that vein, I hope you'll forgive me if I play psychiatrist, but I insist you elaborate. What exactly do *you* already know? What does all your education-- what does all your *wisdom* afford you?

Will considers this before answering. “You know, the funny thing about being 'on the spectrum', is, that although I have difficulty initially understanding sociological norms-- although this has, in the past, made for a notable delay in an appropriate response and too often allowed for an inappropriate one-- I've been taught by trial and error. I've learned.”

Hannibal smiles placidly. “What have you learned?”

“Well, by force of necessity I've developed a keen eye for observing exactly *how* I am *supposed* to respond. I'd take the situation and replay it in my head: I'd figure out *why* I was supposed to respond that way. Experience built upon itself. Basic Pavlovian conditioning: I made special effort to emulate my reactions in accordance to expectation. It's called 'situational awareness'.”

“You hardly need to reeducate me,” Hannibal wryly points out.

“Don't get all up in arms, *Doctor.* I'm not asking for receipt of your credentials... or medical license,” Will grins. “Though I wonder, is it revoked?”

The other man's expression darkens. “It doesn't suddenly invalidate an entire decade of education and subsequent, annually consecutive, mandatory supplemental study. And it certainly neither steals from me the experience garnered from the professional application of these skills on the operating table nor does it nullify the near fifteen years spent running my own practice.”

“Touche."

"I don't appreciate the implication that a piece of paper torn in half equates with sudden incompetence."

“It doesn't bother me anyway, you were never really my doctor. We were, after all, only 'having conversations'.”

“On that note, let's not be diverted from this one.”

“Okay fine,” Will huffs, never having cared for that pushy little nudge shrinks like to give when their patient is wandering astray. When the reins are tugged, the conversation loses its organic flow and the constrained format triggers his defenses. It sets him on edge. Hannibal actually is well informed of this which is why he resents his present use of the tactic.

“So I have enough situational awareness now, to be aware of how relationships are supposed to work... or I guess, rather, how they *look*. I don't have great practical experience, you know, the almost non-existent instances of dating, a failed marriage doomed from the beginning. Weird friendships? Tentative ones, abusive ones, manipulative ones. They're usually always manipulative. Or obsessed. Sometimes so obsessed they want to play 'doctor' instead of *'having conversations'*,” He explains, fixing a pointed look at Hannibal.

“You're displeased by the way I redirected your attention,” he acknowledges. “I would not typically, but as this personally pertains to me, you understand the insistent nature of my curiosity.”

“I also understand that whatever our connection is surpasses categorization. We don't have the normal 'attractors'.”

“What do you perceive as normal?”

“Common interests for one.”

“Life goals?”

Will considers this. “Fluid. Rapidly evolving. Maybe parallel.”

“That is encouraging. And, it fits with your idea of convention, a standard you hold to some esteem,” Hannibal points out approvingly. “What do you perceive as abnormal?”

“Your attraction to me,” Will answers bluntly.

“Do you mean our *mutual* attraction or only mine to you, specifically?”

“Yours. Or both. I guess both.”

Hannibal rests his chin on the tips of his steepled fingers and leans over the table, interested. “Explain.”

“I am acutely conscious of how I present to other people. My external appearance, my initial impression-- it doesn't stray far from the truth really. I am what I look like: unrefined, uncomplicated, I like dogs, fixing boat motors, fishing, a coffee in the morning, a beer after work. I like to read a chapter of a book before bed. Usually non-fiction, unless it's something classic. I have these, ancillary, cultured-interests in a thing or two you might find more relatable but that's kind of stretching it. I'm not *your* type.”

“How do you know what my type is?”

“Alana, before the window incident comes to mind. She's a prime example. Sophisticated-”

“You are as well, much to everyone's surprise.”

“First of all, I'm not sure if I'm a little offended by that, I mean, *'to everyone's surprise'?* Is it all the plaid?”

“I have a deep affinity for plaid. It's a notable component of my own wardrobe.”

“How do you qualify me as sophisticated? What's your definition? Or do you just have generously low standards to accommodate my ability to put on a tie and taste the difference between one or two wines? I can hardly endure concerts, I hate the ballet and I can list off the top of my head one-thousand things I'd rather do than attend a ball.”

“A ball,” Hannibal parrots, dead-pan.

“You know, participate in charity fundraisers, host fussy dinner parties-”

“*'Fussy'.* 'Fussy dinner parties. Doubting that you've been to many others than my own-”

“Yes, Hannibal. *Fussy.* The little skulls and fruits and posies and origami-napkins. Christ. The meals themselves. Magnificent, but where do you find the time? I know what you used to get up to in-between all that. All those finely-crafted displays that must take ages...do you ever sleep? It's like Santa Claus: How the hell can he deliver all those gifts in one night? How do you explain that to a kid?”

“Meticulous scheduling,” Hannibal replies firmly.

“Well anyway, you get what I'm saying. I'm hardly the type to voluntarily attend the ballet or a ball or a concert or god-only-knows whatever else your sort get up to. The events themselves are boring and then there's always too much talking, and it's always so vapid and contrived.”

Hannibal stares at him baffled. “Have you ever actually been to a ballet? I promise there is very little talking.”

“Intermission.”

“Inescapable unfortunately,” he admits. “I can't help but entertain the image of you attending a performance. You would present quite a picture in a freshly-pressed tuxedo-”

“Snoring? Maybe drooling a little bit? A little dribble out of the corner of my mouth?”

“-Programme unfolded, resting over your eyes...” Hannibal continues.

“God, how attractive. How can you resist me?”

“Not easily.”

Will feels himself blush. "Lies," he accuses, grinning and evading eye contact.

“Rarely.”

“She's *gorgeous.* But she's still approachable. I'm not really approachable.”

“You are fishing for compliments,” Hannibal muses, smirking.

“No, I fish for fish.”

“I like fishing,” Hannibal informs him.

“She's shares more of your interests.”

“Do you really even know what my interests are?”

“Cultured, worldly, high-society style interests.”

“You think I'm elitist, that my interests are so narrow.”

“First of all, I never said that, second of all, I know you're interested in me,” Will replies, “So maybe not so narrow.”

“You are a complex, multi-faceted individual. Very interesting.”

“Very *complicated.*”

“Very complicated is *very interesting.*”

Will sighs. “She's smart and funny.”

“You possess a vast intellect and you can be very clever.”

“Not politely.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees, “Not politely. You do have a sharp tongue.”

“People don't really care for me and I don't really get them anyway. Say a thing they don't like and they usually leave you alone.” Will stretches around for another positive trait. “She's... stable?”

“Not particularly. She has her own brand of demons. As do we all.”

“Well *now,* perhaps. You? The Verger debacle? Ouch.”

“One hopes her wife and child help ease whatever restless torment keep her up at night.”

“I don't think there is anything that can ease mine.”

“Perhaps you'll let me try,” Hannibal suggests.

“I am by textbook, certifiable.”

“If you squint, you can barely tell.”

“Flattery.”

“I often wonder exactly who gave you your original diagnosis and planted that insistent, ugly little weed inside your head and how their liver would taste with fava beans and a nice chianti,” Hannibal muses.

“My brain is fucked, you're a murderer-- well, I'm *kind of* a murderer, too, I think you ought to give more serious consideration to owning dogs, we have different tastes, and I hate the ballet.”

“I ask you to remember there is no one else walking this Earth that can understand the mechanical cogs and spinning wheels of your mind more fluently and kindly insist you arrive at your point,” Hannibal retorts.

“I think this is a blissfully naive, flimsy, pretty little fantasy and it can't sustain for the long-haul. I mean I hope I'm wrong, but I just...” Will shivers, suddenly cold and a little scared. “If

my mind goes, would you go?”

“I might follow after and serve it up for supper after all.”

“I'm not sure if that's meant to be reassuring.” Will frowns. “Is it me, or is it just the anomaly-- the fucked up bits of my brain that defy your understanding? I mean, is it the entire package or just a few aspects?”

Hannibal reflects his frown, appearing somewhat unclear on the question. “Without that anomaly, your mind is of little interest.”

Will blinks. “That answers that.”

There is a pregnant pause before Hannibal registers the miscommunication.

“Ah, I believe there is need for further clarity. Your mind is of *clinical* interest owing to it's unique capability. My personal interests lay elsewhere.”

“That, clarifies so much, thank you,” Will retorts dryly.

“I am attempting to disabuse you of the notion that your brain is in anyway less wonderful than how you perceive it. Your flaws are you, Will."

Will is too quiet in response.

"I think you've misinterpreted what I've said.”

“No, I get it. Yeah, the exotic is erotic. If I wasn't damaged in this enticing, specific way, I'd be absolutely, perfectly disposable.”

“You are sum of your parts, Will. I would prefer you intact.”

“But you'd settle for my head in a jar.”

“Medically impractical. No electric impulses.”

“You're trying to be funny.”

“Give me the benefit of the doubt: assume there was no gaffe-- no errant instance in which I've misspoke-”

“What's said is said,” Will interjects, batting away his plea for acquittal with a dismissive sneer. “You can't turn back the hands of the clock, and I can't ignore what I hear.”

“You believe what I said is some sort of 'Freudian slip'? Freudian theories are long past discreditable, but I won't condescend to inform you of that which you already know. A benefit of the doubt I grant, which you've denied me.”

“Pretend *you're* the wounded party,” Will scoffs.

“You nurse your wounds yet paradoxically, you're smug about it. You fleece my insignificant mistake for all it's worth. Why? To what end? To feed a stale grudge? Or are you compensating for something else?”

“Are you even really attracted to me? I mean physically? Do you like me like this, or do you wish you could watch me take on a bad passenger and act really fucked up for days trying to kick out the remnants from my brain? Or do you wish I was still sick? Wish you could still poke around up in here and ask me to draw you a fucking fucked-up clock? I mean, seriously, you don't actually want to help me tune an engine or walk a dog, do you? Suck my cock? Fuck me in the ass? Or do you want me to fuck you in the ass? I bet not. You aren't even remotely attracted to men are you?”

Hannibal ignores the crass accusations to focus on the important one. “It's unusual, but not unprecedented. From what I've observed all indications point to this being an uncommon occurrence for you as well, furthermore, I would go on to presume you've also had less experience with men, intimately. To address the other related issue-- your blatant obstinate blindness is, frankly, startling. I think you'd still persist with the same doubts even if your pants were down around your ankles and I was kneeling in front of you.

“You place strange value with strange trade-in. Very little would shock me.”

“There is no secret ploy to 'get your brain'. Tighten the screws Will, your hinges are coming undone.” Hannibal laughs. “Your frantic concern over this erroneously perceived obsession I have with your insanity presupposes your insanity is even quantifiable.”

Will doesn't say anything, feeling a little stupid for the outburst.

“You should know, it will be highly unlikely I will ever agree to tune an engine with you. You're not very nice to me around bits of machinery and I hope you'll consider filling a prescription for some olanzapine next time you endeavor to work on that kind of project. I will, however, consider walking a dog,” he grins. “And I doubt you'd have to ask me very nicely to suck your cock.”

“And yet, I'm still hung-up on the fact that you served me an herbed-marinade.”

“Three years ago, Will. Three. The flavor is long vanished, but I wouldn't dream of feeding you anything concocted from the cabinets. Perhaps wait until spring and give a garden a chance to grow us something fresh.”

Will closes his eyes and laughs softly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You said my mind was without interest, the rest of it. In context, I understand what you mean, but I can't let it go. So, humor me, Doctor, what, in all your great powers of observation does this tell you?”

Hannibal smiles and his teeth look sharp. He does not hesitate to elucidate, more than happy to strike back. “It illustrates your pleasure in finding fault in me which is explicitly indicative of how you measure yourself. You use me as your framework for comparison. You need to revise your methods. I am not the suitable tool by which to gauge yourself, Will. But I admit, I do find it flattering: it implies your regard-- a respect and admiration I've long sought from

you. This knowledge changes our dynamic, regardless of your intention, unmindful of your preference: it imbues me with authority."

"Far-reaching," Will objects.

"Is it?" Hannibal asks standing from his chair. Sauntering around the table he advances on his target.

"Do you require reminding?" he asks, reaching down to grab Will by his wrists, urging him to his feet. Holding him steadily in place with a firm hand pressed to his shoulder and circling behind him, Hannibal revisits the exact way they stood against each other in the shower. Flaying his hand, fingers spread against Will's chest, he slides his palm down to just over his belly, tripping over the row of buttons on the journey down. "Do you remember? The affect is replicated and you shiver the same at my touch."

Will sucks in a breath, his eyes pinch closed. His teeth grind together and his hands at his sides close into fists. He is not shivering-- he is shaking, and it's not from pleasure, but acutely felt rage. *Humiliation.*

Hannibal feels the difference and hushes him with a soft kiss pressed against the back of his neck, just below his hairline. "This is not cruelty, Will. This is an example. I will illustrate to you the conundrum this presents for us because it must be addressed and your input will be invaluable in seeking its resolution."

The sultry tone; the note of honesty within it, the tender, unassertive suggestion of contact all serve to ease, and too easily seduced, Will finds himself inevitably pliant in his arms and receptive to his demonstration.

"You submit, you can't help it, and I've no *parti pris, mon cher.* This is entirely your own, native response," Hannibal whispers. After releasing Will back to his seat, he returns to his own. "Herein lies the problem. Suppose I leverage this authority. You follow me willingly, utterly unwitting to your own deception. You make me your pilot, you hand me the helm and I can steer you any direction I choose. Your decisions are no longer your own and although we travel together down the same road, it is not by your *sui juri.* There is no reward for either of us: you are a puppet and I persist fueling my own delusion. But, I can discriminate between artifice and authenticity-- I can read the subtle tells. I am beholden to what this insight reveals; it will serve to strip the delusion of any comfort and leftover for me will only be a pathetic mirage."

"And an ego blown to smithereens," Will accuses heartlessly. He has a sense of his own pettiness, but it doesn't stop him. "You can't abide the thought you hadn't won based solely on the merit of your *winning personality.*"

"A spiteful comment that further exposes your present bout of insecurity. You are uncomfortable because I am correct, but I didn't need that confirmation. Perhaps the example was too direct an approach."

"I appreciate that you realize you're an asshole, but my pride doesn't need tending. I assure you it's still intact. Don't divert attention away from the point. You claim *I* am insecure. Turn

the tables. You're terrified of accidentally mishandling me. You're terrified you'll somehow turn me into some kind of love-sick zombie that will blindly conform to your every whim. It's patently ridiculous. You have a very low opinion of the quality of my inner-compass and very high opinion of your own ability to shift the Poles."

Hannibal refrains from response and Will grins, feeling his vengeance unfold. "At the heart of *your* 'problem' is that you know your life and liberty are at stake-- all pends on my decision. Am I your ally? Am I your enemy? Friend or foe: it's a dicey gamble, isn't it? But I'm not going to strong-arm you into taking that risk. Even if it's in my best interest to try, there is nothing I could do if you decided I wasn't worth all that."\

"Do you truly believe that I would find satisfaction in your company if I knew it was only by virtue of purposefully manipulating it into affect?" Hannibal poses rhetorically. "Would I not find this sham alliance lacking in substance? Indulge the question: *if you were me*, would you find this any less repugnant? Would you *not* be profoundly disappointed?"

"We both own varying degrees of advantage over each other," Will points out.

"In various ways we do," he agrees.

"Then, why shouldn't you maneuver the chessmen into checkmate if you know the game is already slanted in your favor? Historically speaking, you don't turn over your King when you're ahead."

"In a charitable show of self-denigrating martyrdom you suggest I should be mercenary. You have imagined a version of me where this would be to my benefit, but I'm pleased to inform you, Will, that your logic is defective. You fail to take into account my feelings for you. Knowing I have your conscious consent, that you've joined me voluntarily-- *of your own volition*, makes a world of difference to me."

Will is unimpressed. "I doubt you need for me to explain my skepticism."

"Are you hoping I'll bully, bribe or blackmail you into complicity?"

"Aren't you tempted to anyway? You could so neatly ensure your own success. I mean, look at me," Will demands. "I'm obviously a fool for you. An idiot block-of-wood in service to the puppet-master."

It's clear to see that beneath the surface, Hannibal is bristling with indignation, however to his credit, he maintains his composure as if he is entertaining some small hope that it might project forward and calm the tantrum, but Will knows he's beyond a palliative: the swelling tide of humiliation burning hot and low inside the pit of his gut resists neutralization.

He's so fucked he can't see straight.

"You essentially said it yourself," he contends, laughing darkly, "I'm your goddamned perfect *patsy*. Why waste an easy opportunity?"

“You beg me to coerce you-- to *threaten you.* Why? So in case of the worst-case scenario, you can profess your innocence with a clear conscience?” Hannibal asks, as near to incredulous as Will has ever seen.

He feels himself bending but he doesn't want to buy into it.

“Give me any reason-- *any reason* you wouldn't,” Will demands, his desperation; his utter *despair* so transparent it saturates every syllable.

“Hypothetically, should you force me to suffer your rejection, I would be forced to accept it. I would rather endure unhappy and dogged by your FBI hounds than endure in pretense. I won't hand you your get-out-of-jail-free card, Will. I won't knock down for you the obstacles you've constructed against me. You can pander to them all you like. You have my permission. It won't make you a coward, and no harm will befall you. In fact, I won't touch you. I won't even look at you, and if you are still unconvinced, I'll transfer over to you the code to the safe-room. You can make it whatever you think I can't guess.”

“You'll be safe from me and tucked away when Dolarhyde pays his visit. There are security cameras that you can switch on from a panel at the desk. They pan the entirety of every room and as far as the eye can see from the exterior of the house. Count ten minutes, tack on an additional five for leeway. I should have crossed the property-line by then and you can come out. Help yourself to a drink. You'll find a selection stored in the cooler below the island counter. When Jack arrives you can go home with him. Go ahead and play the victim, it shouldn't be too challenging for you.”

“Then what? Enter Witness Protection?” Will scoffs.

“You do as your inclined, but if you choose the path that splits from mine, I promise, I will never seek you out. You will never see me again. With distance of miles and time between us, pretend me away. Try to live your life as well as you can, however it suits you. Try to forget me.”

Try to forget me. The challenge is repeated-- the *same* challenge he'd dared Will before when there was still a wall of glass between them. There is nothing between them now. Hannibal's expression is testing. Will meets his eyes. “Don't you think I'm in a little too deep?”

“I have long thought that I've been,” Hannibal replies. “Had you or I burned any less bright, we'd be far away from each other by now. Lonely nomads traveling in opposite directions, forever divergent, cold and cratered, instead we've swallowed every asteroid, incinerated every comet.”

There is a generosity of affection sparkling in his eyes when he looks at Will.

“You asked me why. But the answer will make your squeamish. There is no scientific explanation. I can only posit from what's gatherable, from what I've observed, and obviously, in disclaimation, as it pertains to us-- *to me personally*, it isn't *entirely* without bias.”

“Fate,” Will concludes with a tug of apprehension. It's what he presumes Hannibal is leading to and hearing himself say it out loud lends the idea credibility; reality. Though, at the same

time, he can't help but cringe. The concept, obviously, glaringly antithetical to Will, is embarrassing to even suggest.

“You know, from time to time, in the beginning, in between my overwhelming fascination with you, I despised you a little. Until we met, I had been existing under the impression that I was an autonomous whole, solitary but stronger for it.”

“Monotheistic,” Will points out, with a small self-amused grin, but Hannibal narrows his eyes unimpressed.

“You and I both know you lack any genuine belief in that sentiment. These attempts to insult me, these sarcastic little barbs you sling at me are reliquaries of our contentious past, and it's a habit you ought kick.”

“It's not exactly unreasonable,” Will bites out, scowling.

“Of course. I agree. It's not your fault,” Hannibal assuages. “I have been a fixed, natural outlet for your anger for several years. I've done little to inspire or deserve your kindness.”

Will snorts. “That's a lax way of putting it.”

“I'm not abdicating responsibility,” Hannibal amends, “I accept blame for the damage I've inflicted. However, there has been no other, Will, than you, that I've allowed to see me. That in itself is the greatest kindness I am capable of showing. You were not receptive. You betrayed me.”

“You mistakenly believed that,” Will points out. It's not spiteful, but it is a reminder and one Hannibal apparently doesn't require.

“Of course I did,” Hannibal sharply retorts, his defense adamant and intimidating. “I am many things, but I am not, nor have I ever been a fool.”

Will can't help but shrink back a little from the momentary spark of fury flaring in the other man's eyes. “You have since had a change of heart?” he asks quietly, careful to neither invite further wrath nor exhibit the extent of his own anger.

Hannibal sucks in a breath in apologetic deference, lowering his chin along with his eyes. He's never been more exposed; more vulnerable, and Will is convinced that this emotion is genuine. “I erred. My judgment is not infallible. Yes, at the time, I believed that. My interpretation of the situation was based off of instinct. And,” he adds, “I am not blind to how what I do and what I am appears to others. Humanity is deaf. They see repugnance and tolerate it-- I do not.

“You were protecting yourself,” Will explains, having known this.

“I drew my cloak back over myself. It was hasty. I did not think of the consequences.”

“Hindsight is 20/20.”

“I was operating from a lack of data,” Hannibal explains. “I won't make the same mistake.

“I need you but I don't trust you,” Will muses, “Seems to be the over-arcing theme I'm picking up on between us.”

“I'm not accustomed to placing faith in anyone other than myself. But, there are no delusions of God-hood as you suggested. I was convinced that I had finished evolving, content with the notion that I was unintended for companionship. Sans influence, I could be exactly what I'd become. But then, we met. You made an impression that fractured that conviction. My solitude suddenly felt desolate.”

“I've always felt a little desolate. Sometimes a little destitute, too.”

Hannibal smirks. “You have long since passed the point of having to use duct tape to hold together your shoe soles. You can purchase new ones. *I* can purchase you new ones.”

“Taping up my soul is a way of life,” Will argues.

“You won't need any more tape. Neither will I.”

Will blinks at his companion myopically. “What?”

“I was following *your* analogy,” Hannibal defends smiling.

“Okay. Why don't we need any more tape?” Will humors.

“That's obvious, if you know why we needed it in the first place. Because you and I were never entirely whole. For you, Will, this was an inveterate state, a hated, barely tolerable way of life. You've been fractured by external influence, of course you longed for cohesion. But had you never suffered you would have never grown and we would not be here.”

“Why?”

“You put on another man's glasses, Will, and through his lenses, you see the world altered in perspective. You contend you have the strength of mind to differentiate between his reality and yours-- you can occlude yourself from this new vista, but you cannot divorce yourself from the knowledge of it. It expands your repertoire, enables a vaster cache of options for you. Your experience of the universe in enhanced irreversibly. Unless you can travel time, you can't erase the addition. It sometimes makes you a better man and sometimes worse, but always it, changes you a little. And this promotes growth.”

'We grow together now.'

Chapter 11

"What are we going to grow into?" Will asks. "The 'Odd-Couple'?"

Hannibal doesn't pick up on the reference but he understands the meaning.

"You depict a veneer, Will, you cling to a surface vision of what you are. But we are all more than what we convey. All the many versions of ourselves expressed for different situations, different people, whether consciously or not, we are more than those, too. Our interests, our ambitions, all we enjoy, all that we fear, all that we love and despise, all these surface aspects have deeper written foundation," Hannibal explains, heading over to the pantry. "The dogs, the fishing, the flannel, this gritty ensemble of masculinity; I believe it's all genuine, but it also serves as a very convenient method of dissimulation. Those who have had the fortune of knowing you for awhile are never entirely deceived. You know that. Any length of time around you, and any person with two brain cells to rub together can eventually grasp how incredibly different you are than say, another man who looks like you, who owns a similar pattern, a similar lifestyle, similar hobbies."

Will sits quietly watching his companion rifling through his stock-pile of non-perishable provisions.

"You are clinging to this idea that we're so different on the outside. Are you worried you'll get bored of me?"

"I don't think that's possible."

Hannibal temporarily ceases his inspection to fix his entire attention on his guest. "Then are you worried that I'll tire of you?"

"Maybe," Will admits.

"I could have a million variations of this same argument with you and I doubt you'll ever be convinced. So instead, I will endeavor to prove it to you over time and hope that you'll eventually catch on," he declares. "But for the record, I dedicate myself very thoroughly to the causes I choose."

"I'll contribute to your fundraiser, if you're hosting the drive."

"Usually that would culminate in a celebratory dinner for the donors. But unfortunately, there seems to be insufficient fare," Hannibal informs returning to his search.

"What have you found?"

"Thus far, nothing very promising."

Will grins watching his host's growing consternation. "As long as it's already dead and reasonably digestible I think I'll live."

“I can promise you nearly everything will be expired. Or at least, just past it's sell-by-date.” Hannibal frowns, deflating in disappointment as he surveys the label on yet another can lid before dispensing it in the trash. “Beans. Rice, stewed tomatoes, bullion and more beans” He bitterly announces, taking personal offense at the utter deficiency of his selection.

“Sounds like soup is on the menu,” Will says brightly, hoping to uplift his companion's souring mood.

“And a very poor soup at that,” Hannibal laments, huffing a frustrated sigh. Will can't help but find his unexpected sulk endearing. It's one of the most openly expressive moments he's ever witnessed from him and it feels very intimate. He thinks he might be the only person on this Earth this man would ever allow to see him this way and the realization sets loose an elated fluttering of excitement in his chest.

“I had my heart set on sharing a decent meal with you as our first after so long,” Hannibal explains to him, downcast with defeat.

Will's heart breaks a little for him. “We can postpone it. Doesn't matter to me,” he suggests.

Hannibal's eyes flash angrily, but the emotion is not directed at his guest. “It *does* matter to me. I'd naively entertained this idea for awhile,” he admits. “I was rather invested in it from the moment you returned to me. The moment you offered me a glimpse of hope, Will. I wanted to be able to show you what it means to me to have you at my table.”

Will blinks, startled by the fire; the heat in his tirade.

“I knew the provisions would be modest, but I'd truly hoped to do better by you than this.”

This is a small-scale breakdown and Will gets the feeling this is not about soup. “At least it will be warm,” he offers.

Hannibal leans back against the island behind him, staring forward blankly into the pantry. “You gave me permission to let the seeds of fantasy germinate, it meant everything. I was deprived for a very long time and I do not know when you exactly switched gears, Will, or why, but I had rarely allowed myself to imagine you would, and I never thought it would be very likely. I wanted you to know I haven't taken that decision for granted.”

Will forces himself to immobilization, pushing down his urgent desire to jump out of his chair and scream at Hannibal that there are at least a few dozen better ways he could show his gratitude than making him supper and if he'd any presence of mind to do so, Will would be more than happy to accommodate any one of those alternative methods.

“I sent the Dragon after you. After your family. You still chose me,” Hannibal marvels.

“That was an extraordinarily bad bit of decision-making on your part, because I'd been inclined to hop on the bandwagon with you for a long time, and then, after that, I'll be honest, I really, *really* almost *didn't.*”

“You know after that, Alana stripped my entire cell,” Hannibal reveals. “I'd burned the bridge between us, all that new construction I'd never guessed about. In retrospect, had I known then what I know now the same mistake would not be repeated.”

“I sort of had assumed that,” Will smirks. “It's kind of a repetitive exchange between us at this point.”

“Will, I don't think you fully grasp the gravity of what I'm trying to convey. For a day or two I had *nothing.* It was brief moment in time, but when I was standing in it, there was *nothing left.* I was never convinced he'd succeed in killing you, but that did not matter because *I killed you*. You were gone from my mind. The walls and the floors were empty in my mind and in my reality, and what I'd done to satisfy my hatred and resentment and despair, what should have felt like retribution, what should have been my absolution had instead, only left me barren, and as I searched the halls inside my head and found them rendered to the same hopeless state only then did I realize what I'd wrought upon myself,” Hannibal confesses. “Do you now see how it would move me, when I saw you again, and that first moment you lowered your shields to tell me you were with me?”

“So you never held out much hope for breaking out by your own enterprise?”

“I had ample opportunity to calculate every potential method I might escape, and countering me, was my warden, just as equally eager to do the same so she knew where to fix the holes in the system to prevent that,” he explains. “And, she spent her downtime plotting every way she could make my perpetual internment less pleasant than it already was without breaking any important rules. Her sadism, was incredibly directed, which was, naturally understandable.”

“A woman scorned is a dangerous foe,” Will muses, inevitably reminded of Bedelia: a pertinent face for a long-harbored, heavy-anchored insecurity. In this regard, she and Alana easily transpose whenever either are mentioned: both embody similar qualities unobtainable to him; traits Hannibal has proven appreciation for. Will keeps unhappy ownership of this knowledge. He is keenly aware that what they interchangeably inhabit represents everything he can never be for Hannibal, serving as a poignant reminder of his every inadequacy and the only hope that keeps him afloat is Hannibal's assurance that he's somehow special. Yet, the latent threat persists, haunting him and Will lives in fear.

Though Alana and Bedelia have been cast aside, they aren't dead-- at least *not yet* , but regardless of whether they're living on borrowed time, they're dead to Hannibal in every way that counts and the ghosts of Bluebeard's wives are spiteful.

'What makes you think you're any different from us?' They demand. *'What makes you think he won't do the same to you in the end?'* He hears them hiss.

The taunts are insidious, worming their way deep. *'When he tires of you, you'll meet the same fate,'* They warn.

“Describing Alana as 'scorned' is an ill-fit in this scenario. Perhaps she still nursed an old wound and perhaps that was a contributing factor, but in this case, she would more likely argue 'betrayal', but, I know her too well to believe that. Her real injury is her pride. She is

angry at herself: she thinks she should have known better. She's always been proud of how clever she thinks she is. I've made her second-guess herself."

"She would hate you for that," Will agrees. "I often hate you for that."

"You're both prideful creatures," Hannibal points out. "The defining difference is, that where she is self-righteous about her intelligence, you *are*, in fact, right. You caught on, long before she did."

"Because that's how you arranged it," Will defends, "You *wanted* me to know, and you did everything in your power to keep her from knowing."

"Her infatuation with me was of equal blame."

"Is that your alibi? Is that what exonerates you of your responsibility?" Will scoffs. "You *encouraged* that. You knew if you let her fall in love with you she would be much more *pliable* to manipulation."

Hannibal's smirk is cruel. "It's interesting, Will. I never noticed how much you share in common with Alana."

Will frowns, disturbed by the direction he thinks this is heading.

"She was also, often, incredibly *jealous*," he explains. "Of course, you wouldn't know this, having never experienced the delight of her *intimate* companionship for yourself." The extra jab adds salt to the wound.

Will shakes his head, laughing darkly. "That is very catty and very petty and you know it."

"I would like to point out, that Alana's jealousy revolved around you, just as yours is revealing often to revolve around her. Though in her case, her feelings were absolutely valid," Hannibal edifies, softening the blow. "Returning to my initial point, her anger made her a formidable warden. You had every opportunity to witness her tenacity. She must have put up quite the *fuss* when you originally included her in on your plan."

"She did seem to be awfully *devoted* to her duty," Will supplies, scratching his chin, his tone ironically perplexed. "It's as if she carried some sort of *personal* vendetta, but surely there couldn't have been a reason for that."

"I'm sure the judge that appointed me to her care was generously paid."

"I doubt any judge with even the tiniest shred of moral fiber would have needed *too* much bribery," Will laughs. "I can't begin to imagine the poetic justice she must have felt seeing you after that first time she locked you up with her *own key.*She really seemed to *enjoy* playing that role-- being your own, personal *hawk.* And you, really *ruffled her feathers,* so I bet she was pretty *twitchy.*"

Hannibal fixes an annoyed frown at him. "Live the experience."

"No thank you," Will declines, grinning.

“And you do not pretend she is the same woman from your past.”

“I don't nurture nostalgia. I can't. I've evolved. Nobody you've touched hasn't been forced to *evolve,* Hannibal.”

“Then you no longer suffer any delusions as to the nature of her character.”

“I 'suffer' a thing or two here and there, but I don't suffer any about Alana. What she's become can be no more undone than whatever I've become.”

“You've taken into account that I'm not the sole culprit.”

“Of course not,” Will confirms. “But you did tip over the first domino.”

“So I've assisted what you've become?”

Will narrows his eyes at Hannibal. “I think you know exactly what hand you had in that. There was intentional influence.”

“And this is combined with the external factors, factors you also hold me accountable for.”

“Largely,” he confirms.

“So do you know who you are now?”

“How can I ever *really* know? I don't think anyone does regardless of what they pretend, it's not exactly a process with an expiration date, is it?”

“Not from my understanding,” Hannibal replies evenly. “But you did imply a past tense.”

“You're obfuscating the point with semantics?” Will demands, exasperated. “I'm sure you know what I meant. No one can avoid the obstacles life throws in their path. They either overcome them or they don't. After they swim against the tide, if they make it to smoother waters, they'll feel it won't they? Every muscle will ache from use, right? There are consequences. The consequences make an impact. No one is immune to that. No one is unchanged and they either endure or they don't.”

“Survival of the fittest.”

“Exactly,” Will agrees. “And fortunately, this lets me foster a little hope for Alana. I hope she can recover even a fraction of what she once used to be. She was a nice person. She was a *good* person.”

Hannibal stares at him with a small, amused smile. “You should hear yourself. You sound incredibly sure about that. Self-righteously confident, so much so, it's a little revolting,” he contends. “Throughout the course of this tangent, we've been exercising great focus on Alana. More than I'd meant to. She's a subject matter that provokes a strong reaction from you and I've observed that this particular conversation has derailed aspects of your personality into foreign territory. I would like to suggest you pause for a moment's reflection.”

“I'm not feeling very obliged to comply,” Will objects. “Stop examining everything I say that you don't like to hear as if it's coming out of someone else's mouth.”

“I hear you plainly,” Hannibal defends, “But do you hear yourself? There is unerring vibrancy to your conviction in a style of vanity that differs from your own and an urgent passion in your tone I've never heard from you before but it's still recognizable. Do you recognize it? Your anger is unrelenting but is it for Alana, Will? Are you angry at me for her on your own behalf or *from hers*? I think you grieve for that part of Alana you think I've destroyed in her, I think your memory of that errant quality is spilling over.”

“I think you're afraid that it's genuine and independently felt,” Will asserts.

“Is it entirely?” Hannibal insists. “I don't mean to be condescending. I know you think you've got a good handle on yourself against intrusion, but this would not be the first slip you've had today.”

Will *does* take a moment to reflect and he's not entirely convinced Hannibal isn't at least a little right to some small degree. “My empathy and my sympathy are not mutually exclusive,” he defends. “Once upon a time I considered her a friend. I wasn't often naturally on the same page as her, but the virtue of what she stood for proved itself and demanded respect. To deny that would be an unforgivable disservice.”

Hannibal smooths a hand over a wrinkle in his shirt. “You are very sure of her integrity; of it's absolute, crystalline sterility,” he acknowledges with a capitulating sigh. “But I've known her for a long time, Will. My relationship with Alana far proceeds you and I know her *very well.* When she was my student I spotted some talent and took her under my wing. As my protege I groomed her God-given ability into something useful and she made an interesting project. I recognized her attraction to me and although I never found her particular charms compelling enough to explore, her attention was amusing. I dangled a carrot and she snapped at the bit-”

“How that must have stroked you ego,” Will snorts.

“If it did, I never felt the effect of it then. Should I still anticipate some belated burst of gratification at some point down the line, Will? It is more than a decade past due.”

“Then what purpose was there in leading her on?”

“It secured her motivation,” Hannibal explains. “She learned a lot from me and she learned perhaps too much *about* me at the same time.”

“And all of that came back to bite you in the ass,” Will surmises.

“I taught her to see past the veneer, and from time to time she seems to be able to. She used that as well as her knowledge about me to her advantage. In our time together when I was her mentor, I discovered a vein of aptitude in her that I doubt anyone else ever had. It could be viewed as a strong sense of justice. She has quite an inflated sense of moralistic superiority, a conviction she borrows from, which allows her to confidently discern morality in others. She asserts this authority too easily, as if she *knows* she is entitled to it, because she genuinely

believes she is qualified; that her command of ethics is beyond reproach. I encouraged it because it does not deviate far from my own doctrine."

"In what way?" Will asks cautiously.

"I said before, I don't tolerate repugnance. There are instances where a person has committed an act too offensive to forgive. This person should be stripped of their humanity-- their *personhood.* God gave man sentience: the ability to perceive himself subjectively, to decide an action and have a basis for it. When that basis is consciously malevolent or there is no basis, then that individual serves no better purpose than an animal and should be reduced to that level. Alana is fully capable of detaching herself from sympathy, but she chose to sublimate this ability in favor of demonstrating a sense of mercy. She is so convincing an actress she had *herself* convinced for a very long time. Recent years have liberated her of that delusion."

"I'm sure it has," Will snorts.

"Under her captivity, I was confined inside an impenetrable, insular world. She hobbled me. She reduced me to a state of uninformed ignorance and that meant that she was my only access to the outside world; my only source of news. She ensured my reliance on her by handsomely paying everyone in her employ charged with my care and my watch to tell me nothing. She new exactly how this would disable me and ensure my absolute dependence. She designated herself as the flea in my ear and even the barest bone thrown in the cage is a gift to a hungry dog. She'd throw me a bone every once in awhile and it sustained me. It was a fuel I siphoned only too eagerly: desperation doesn't know how to censor itself. All along, she reveled in her lordship over me, pretending she was bestowing upon me some remarkable kind of charity. She had me almost convinced it was. It became a form of currency, she would share a glimmer of what she knew, maybe a rumor of something she'd overheard about you, and in exchange I'd let her see a fleeting glimpse of my reaction to that."

"She couldn't tell if it was feigned or not?"

Hannibal sucks in a breath. "It rarely was. You persisted ignoring me and I was starving for the merest scrap of information about you and she knew that."

Will knows exactly where this is leading and readies himself.

"Eventually she told me you had entered a relationship and I should listen for the toll of wedding bells."

It's exactly as he'd expected. Will feels every sharp pang of agony in hearing this announcement as Hannibal must have felt when having experienced it originally. It's etched heavily into each hoarse note of every word.

"She came to me the day the vows were exchanged, still in the outfit she'd worn to your reception, as if she couldn't wait to change out of it before telling me. It was a crowning moment of glory for her," he explains, laughing softly and darkly. "I wasn't feeling very congenial toward her after that, and one day I decided to exact my revenge. She was newly pregnant, I could smell it through the glass when she passed me a book through the slot. 'The

Verger heir, at long last realized,' I said. 'I would congratulate you in any other instance.' This was only the smallest aggression, something she was inured to, and she was unresponsive. I didn't even receive the slightest hint of an expression, but I was spoiling for war so I chose the gravest insult in my arsenal. 'I wonder if you thought of him when they implanted his seed inside you. You carry Mason inside you now. Do you think of him when you touch your wife? Does she think of her brother? Will you tell your child his birthright? What will you do when he comes into his congenital inheritance bearing the combined malignancies of his progenitors? Will you smother him in his sleep or should you remove the tumor from your womb before it grows teeth?'"

Will is impressed. "That was inventive."

"It already had a healthy supply of inspiration from which to draw," Hannibal admits modestly. "It was petty."

"It was a favor."

"A hint of advice she chose to ignore and I will be pleased to keep tabs on the development. As he matures, I imagine Alana will find it harder and harder to forget the questions whispered to her from the only man she despised more than her son's own father," Hannibal muses.

"Which is why you don't want her dead," Will guesses. "It's ironically similar to the reason you didn't kill Mason."

"Isn't that my 'poetic justice'?" Hannibal asks. "But, as the saying goes, if you play with fire you will get burned. What I said to her finished the project I'd started all those years ago. Whatever softness Alana ever had did not transform into jagged edges, but instead, it had a rather *thinning* effect. She's a paper bag full of knives. If you shake her, she tears and cuts you. She visited me often after that. I awakened a streak of cruelty in her and she loved to remind me of that by sharing all of her colorful ideas about your marital bliss."

"That definitely helps explain why you sent a raving lunatic after my wife and kid."

"From the conception of my association with Dolarhyde, the idea was always there. But in her own, persistent way, Alana's favorite recent past time did help tip that thought over the edge," he admits.

"I think I have a better picture now."

"The rose-tinted lenses are off and she's demoted from her pedestal?" Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs. "She's cut from no better a cloth than you or I."

"And she knows it and doesn't bother hiding it very well anymore. From the first day she was a terrible miser. Until the FBI forced her hand, she didn't let them through the gates. I served consult when they were particularly stuck, you see, because their favorite little helper made himself scarce. In exchange they rewarded me with all the books and little comforts Alana loved to deny me. I was grateful, because all of it was a good distraction; it was a reprieve to

be able to focus on something other than the ghost haunting the halls of my palace," Hannibal sighs. "I tried to keep you at bay. The only thing that aided that was reminding myself that you'd forsaken me."

"That's dramatic," Will points out.

"It makes it no less true. Had you ever tried to *empathize* with *me*, Will? Do it now. For just a second: imagine you are me, and you know that the only person you want to think of you is doing his best everyday to forget you." His smile is forced. "Thankfully, the idea of you tucked away in Wolftrap in your little nest with your dogs and your wife and your child allowed me to relocate you to the other side of the moat."

"I was never able to move you past the front door," Will quietly confesses.

Hannibal's eyes soften affectionately. "When you came back, even before I explicitly knew you were mine, Will, I was already yours."

"That's quite a leap of faith."

"The leap happened without my consent, but it happened still," he whispers. "You are my guest. You are allowing me to serve you, to feed you. I wanted very much to share with you something special. Instead, I've found myself limited by my impoverished cupboards and all I can offer you is the drabbest soup."

Will rises from his seat and heads toward the other side of the counter from Hannibal, giving himself an obstacle. It serves well to prevent him from rushing at the other man and tangling him into the frustrated embrace his entire body aches for. "I was under the impression that a good cook could make soup from a stone," he teases lightly.

"I have a block of bullion, stale thyme and nearly out-of-date rice and beans. If you want me to add a stone I doubt it will spoil the flavor."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Will shrugs. "Can I help?"

"I would be disappointed if you didn't."

Will comes around the counter and breathes a little more quickly when their elbows brush. "What can I do?"

Hannibal's hand wraps around his wrist and without warning or hesitation he pulls him in close against himself. Will stumbles into him with a gasp as their chests and chins and elbows collide, and it isn't graceful or even cooperative as he's maneuvered into a frantic, clumsy tangle of an embrace. Hannibal grips his back firmly, twisting the fabric of his shirt in his fists and buries his face into Will's shoulder as if he's clinging onto him for dear life.

Will blinks away his surprise and tries to figure out how to wrap his arms less awkwardly around the other man but the mechanics of this are beyond him because one of Hannibal's arms have slipped beneath one of his and the whole thing forces him into a lopsided twist to one side. Giving up, he rests his his head against Hannibal's and brings up his only free hand

to cup the back of his neck in what he hopes is a comforting gesture, because honestly he isn't sure what this is about, and playing this as safely as possible is the best course of action until he knows otherwise.

"Is this okay?" Will asks gently, and what he really wants to ask is *'Are you okay?'*.

Hannibal laughs softly and he feels it vibrate against his collar bone beneath the warm gust of his breath. "I'm *very* 'okay', Will," Hannibal reassures him before pulling back. He give enough room so that they can see each other clearly and Will feels the warm press of Hannibal's palm cup his cheek. There is a light caress encouraging Will to find eye contact. Hannibal's eyes sparkle at him with clear adoration and he feels himself melt against him.

His eyes flicker closed and he tilts his chin as Hannibal draws nearer, so close their lips nearly touch and the air breathed between them is shared. "You can stay exactly like this," Hannibal whispers and Will isn't sure what that means and he isn't sure if he going to be kissed. "You can stay with me and we can have a life together, and I will feed you much better food-"

"I *like* soup," Will feebly protests.

"And we can have *good* soup as often as you want and I will never, *never* leave you. And if you ever try to leave me, I promise you, you won't get far."

It's in diametric opposition to his earlier promise to the contrary, and it sounds very much like a threat, but Will is keenly aware of the full length of heat pressed against him from chest to hip generating off from Hannibal mixing with his own, and he's long suspected they were unhealthily codependent but he's okay with all of this.

When their lips meet for the first time, it's soft, it's tender and it's over before Will has realized it's ever occurred; just a brush, nothing more than that. And for some reason, it still feels satisfying though the rest of Will's body is begging, *sobbing* for more. But when Hannibal at last releases him, and looks at him in the particular cherishing way he does, as if Will is his lifeblood and everything in the world to him, Will knows there is nothing and no one else he ever wants again more than this man.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Shorter chapter because holiday reasons.

Hannibal caresses Will's jaw, affording him a small, almost *demure* smile before disencumbering himself from their embrace and for a stunned second, Will stares after him, perplexed and feeling more than a little robbed.

“Behind you in the drawer should be a ladle and a set of measuring spoons,” Hannibal informs him, turning away to fetch the pot.

Desperate and undone, Will gapes at him, slack-jawed and uncomprehending. He can barely believe he intends to leave him like this. Almost too easily, Hannibal reallocates his attention from Will to preparing their supper and he wonders at his *gall.* Playing 'hard-to-get' in any variation is intrinsic to the man's *modus operandi*; they'd played this game for years, and Will knows he's guilty for having set that precedent, but he had assumed they'd *both* moved beyond this.

“I'll make enough to tide us over through tomorrow,” he tells him without sparing a look in his direction. “I apologize in advance for the repetition, but in times of hardship, we cinch the belt a little tighter and make the best of what we can.”

Will hardly registers what he's saying to grant this much of an applicable response. “Can't make water out of wine,” he mutters, watching his companion fill the pot under the faucet before setting it on the stove.

“With any hope, sitting overnight *may* improve it's flavor,” Hannibal muses, adding several dashes of various spices and dried herbs before replacing the lid. He spares him a distant smile but his eyes don't follow for their focus to his task.

“A slow boil should allow for a half-way decent infusion, however dehydrated the ingredients,” he explains to Will, striking a match to ignite the pilot. “I think we'll let it sit before adding the rice, which will need a quick rinse, but the beans *do* need to soak before we add them.”

Will watches him flick the spent matchstick into the sink before swinging back around to the stove as gracefully as if he were reenacting the steps to a well-rehearsed dance. Turning the knob, the spark clicks catching immediately and a flash of fire leaps up, flaring around the outer walls of the pot before he adjusts the dial. “And then, we bring it to a simmer,” he whispers loudly enough for Will to hear; to *understand.*

But Will *doesn't* understand and as he watches the subdued flames lick the metal bottom of the pot, he feels a keen sympathy for the tamed blaze.

Hannibal had bred and fed an expectation; an expectation he'd *infused* into that kiss he'd brushed over Will's lips less than minutes before, and although it was brief, it hadn't been *chaste.* The fire he'd lit, torched hot and then just as effortlessly, he'd abandoned the effort, denying the fire the fuel it craved.

Will can't help but wonder *why* and he's unsure what hurts more: his ego or the intense, agonizing tightness in his pants.

Hannibal cuts open the beans and pours them into a bowl and Will glares at him bitterly. His apparent indifference wants to read like disregard but fortunately, Will knows better; it's neither a denial or dismissal-- it's a masterful *re-calibration* and that it comes so easily to him is what he finds so nettling. It's fodder for doubt and doubt is by nature, a very corrosive acid.

Doubt undermines logic.

He's witnessed first-hand his effect on Hannibal, yet, viewed by contrast, *his* effect on Will devours whatever sympathetic response he's experienced in return. Hannibal betrays nothing; there is not even a *shred* of evidence that he's even remotely afflicted in the same way, and while Will gives *himself* enough credit to know there is a highly unlikely probability of that, he can't help but still resent the other man's adept talent as an actor. Hannibal's composure highlights just how utterly *wrecked* he is in comparison and it's *very* unfair.

“Please, the ladle and spoons, Will,” Hannibal gently reminds Will without looking at him-- as if he's intentionally avoiding him. Will's eyes narrow as he studies the other man: Hannibal is fully absorbed in peeling the wrapper from a bullion cube, as if this mundane task-- a task *anyone* could do *blindfolded*, requires his complete attention.

That's exactly when he realizes that his companion is *purposefully* averting his gaze and then it clicks together. Hannibal is being *polite.* He's granting him the privacy to collect himself. For a second, Will doesn't know whether to feel grateful or embarrassed, but he gets a sense the gesture is not entirely for only his benefit: without looking at Will, Hannibal can't see what he's caused and therefore can deny ownership of responsibility. If he's not accountable, he can't be culpable. Will begins to notice a pattern here; it's a defense Hannibal tends to enjoy relying on.

Seeking proof that he's right, he pauses for an extra long second of inaction to test this hypothesis.

“Will,” Hannibal repeats, “Please.” Where he *should* sound impatient, instead, his tone is strained with a hint of *guilt,* and sure enough, though he reaches his hand out toward Will to receive what he's requested, his eyes remain fixed to the counter top.

God, does he want to tell him to 'shove it' *and* 'get it himself'. He pictures himself remaining stubbornly planted in front of the drawer out of sheer spite-- he pictures this forcing Hannibal to finally *look* at him.

“Only because you asked *so* nicely,” Will snorts resentfully before turning around to retrieve the instruments. Yanking open the drawer a little too forcefully, it squeals harshly on it's tracks clinking together it's contents and the commotion draws Hannibal's attention before Will can mask the anger in his expression.\

“Here,” he grunts, thrusting the items into his hands while trying to limit the amount they actually touch as much as he can in the process. Hannibal's eyes flicker up to his for a short moment before reverting away as he accepts what he's handed.

The humiliation is throttling, but it's a comfort to know that at least Hannibal knows he's been caught red-handed.

Will watches him soak the beans in a bowl under the running tap before pouring them into the soup. The bag of rice follows shortly in suit. He sees him swallow. Fixed to the bob of his adam's apple, Will briefly wonders if he's managed to make Hannibal *sweat* . He continues to avoid looking at him, and this, in itself, is a clear indication that he's wrestling with some small form of anxiety and being that he's so classically impervious to the defect, for Will to have achieved this affect is no mean feat.

He wonders how the cogs are spinning in the man's head; what form of evasion he is trying to work out.

“The soup should be ready in twenty-minutes,” Hannibal announces.

Will scoffs. “You make an impressive art-form of Philistinism when it suits you.”

Finally, surrendering to the provocation, Hannibal's eyes lock onto his and he gives him exactly what he's asked for: all the intense and blunt honesty of his own frustration.

“*Restraint* is a far cry from being deliberately *obtuse.*”

Will's heart skips a beat and he licks his lips.

Hannibal's gaze flits down to Will's mouth, having caught the glimpse of his tongue. “*'Turn him into stars and form a constellation in his image,'*,” he quotes before his eyes return, sparkling back at him, feral and dangerous and starving.

Will doesn't recall how they came into such close proximity. Hannibal stands within an arm's reach, but neither bridge the gap. Upon every short, fevered breath he can smell him: Hannibal's own, unique scent mingled with the crisp, herbal fragrance of his imported soap and expensive aftershave. He knows the ridges and sinews and plains of his his body hidden beneath his sweater, he's felt his encompassing heat and the smooth, hard press of his naked flesh against his own. His eyes roam ardently over the roman chiseling of his features, which by rote he can envision to an exacting likeness in his mind.

“'*Earnestly I seek you*,'” Hannibal whispers, “'My soul *thirsts* for you, my flesh *yearns* for yours in a dry and parched land without water.'”

“Then take of my cup and *drink*,” Will dares him.

Hannibal's pupils expand, eclipsing the irises; until only a ring, the same searing scarlet color of that first blush of hot blood spilled from an opened vein encircles the fathomless black center.

Hannibal lowers his chin along with his eyes. “ *'Lead us not into temptation'* ,” he warns, his voice dark and forbidding.

“*Why not?*” Will presses.

If it weren't for their shared experience in the shower, if he hadn't seen evidence to the contrary, he'd suspect he's hiding impotency or some other sexual dysfunction, defect, disease or deviancy behind his peculiar reluctance.

“*'*And on the seventh day, He had finished his work and so He rested. He blessed the day and sanctified it.'*”*

Will sighs. “You have a very rigidly set calendar.”

“'To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose.'”

“We've *arrived here together,*” Will argues, “What you're attempting glorifies an antiquated symbolism *irrelevant* to me.”

Hannibal's eyes flash large, dilated and unsmiling. “Why? Does the idea of courtship make you uncomfortable, Will?” he asks, but Will can tell he isn't really chasing after an answer. “Are you *too wise to woo peaceably*?”

“You cower behind verse and other men's words,” Will remarks, exasperated. “What are you so *afraid* of?”

“I pay homage to words better framed and more concise,” Hannibal defends. “In a succinct fashion, how would you explain how you see the world?”

“'Through a glass...*darkly*,'” Will admits.

Ah. He understands. Hannibal catches the epiphany occur to him and smiles, satisfied.

“I would deny you nothing and indulge you everything.”

“If you were *certain* of me,” he fleshes out.

“This is *our* 'Reichenbach'.”

Will shudders at the restoration of the prophesy. "Only if we both go over. There is still a part of you that resists that small part of me, that part of me you imagine might be an intrusion. If you could be sure the gaps were sealed you wouldn't hesitate to accept me."

“In every respect and every aspect uninfluenced,” Hannibal confirms. “We could seek our solace in each other, merging in the pleasures of the flesh and find that temporary relief, but it

would be a poor consolation upon reimbursement. True marriage that feeds the soul can never be satisfied by a pale impersonation."

Will understands this is not going to be easily demonstrated while there is still the chance, however slim, that he can back out. There is nothing that will convince Hannibal until tomorrow has come and gone. In this regard, they are still finding their footing together on the precipice; they are still in the midst of courtship.

This doesn't neutralize the tension between them, Will still feels every ounce and force of his desire, but it does waylay it's immediacy.

"You could have spared me dancing around the subject and told me plainly in the first place."

"I find too often you request an inelegant candor," Hannibal gripes. "With exception for just now, you don't require it to understand me."

"This was convoluted."

"You were *offended,*" Hannibal realizes.

"I felt... distinctly less desirable than the construction of a mediocre soup."

"If there weren't literal context for it, I would think you just made a rather strained analogy," he points out to Will. "If you were any less desirable to me I would hardly be making you soup at all."

"But you might be making me into soup," Will smirks.

Hannibal enjoys the off-color comment. "Do you think that's less likely now?" he retorts.

"I thought you 'preferred me intact'."

"As long as your humor remains so."

"You're a little convincing," Will laughs. "I might have to look into that safe-room after all."

Hannibal's expression tightens and he holds back his response. Will is curious and so he decides to prod a little further.

"Does that room actually exist?"

"No."

"You were betting I would never ask after it? Or are you lying?"

"I lost control of that threat in the throws of spite."

"You told me I could leave if I chose to," Will points out.

"And then I recanted," Hannibal defends.

Will shakes his head. “No, you never meant it in the first place,” he corrects.

“You're right, Will,” Hannibal agrees. “'If you love something, let it go, if it comes back to you, it is yours forever.' You came back to me.”

“There is something lopsided about your logic. You won't let me go, and yet by the same token, you're giving credibility to the decimal-sized percentage of a chance that I might still decide to try. But if I don't, if I stay, won't you think it's because I have little inclination to be tossed into your soup?”

“Possibly, but I am a very well trained psychiatrist and although my judgment and intuition are never quite as unfailingly astute as yours, I'm fairly confident I can discern between Milgram, Bejerot and Gottman.”

“You hope,” Will supplies honestly.

“I *do,*” Hannibal agrees. “Have you realized that you give me more variation for doubting you than even I've conceived of?”

“If you look at every potential scenario for a situation, it leaves little room for doubt later on.”

“You're covering your bases.”

“And yours,” Will smiles. “Transparency.”

“As long as I can still *see* you.”

“Your jokes could use some improvement.”

“Were you amused?” Hannibal asks curiously.

Will's memory stirs up an image of Beverly Katz, cut into layers and contained within several vertical glass frames. “Not particularly. You never intended to amuse me.”

“Not all the time, at least,” Hannibal agrees.

There conversation is developing too many of it's own layers and Will is growing tired. “Give me one reason to stay.”

"At least you aren't demanding," Hannibal mutters, reaching forward and snagging Will by the shirt front.

Will lets himself be dragged forward until their chests are touching and they have far-crossed over the invisible boundary line again.

"Not yet, anyway," he retorts.

Hannibal kisses him properly this time.

When his arms come around Will and Will's wrap around him, they interlock in symmetry. The footing is found and when their lips meet, their mouths open to each other. The exploration is short, but long enough to curb the edge of their urgency. This is a sampling. This is what it *could* be like. The prospect is inviting.

Will is the first to pull back this time. As torturous as it was to do so, he feels a little sense of pride returned that he could.

He sets the table and Hannibal serves the soup. It's surprisingly good and they eat their fill. Occasionally, beneath the table, Will feels the press of the side of Hannibal's knee brush lightly against his own.

“Come to bed,” Hannibal requests when they're both finished. *To mine* is implied.

Will joins him in the master bedroom, and tucked beneath the sheets and heavy down; their ankles intertwine and fingers tangle and their bodies squirm to find purchase so they're close enough to hear and feel each other's pulse.

“Mine,” he whispers into Will's hair before pressing a kiss to the top of his head. It takes a while after that before Will is able to hush quiet the excited racing of his heart.

Somewhere in the night, Hannibal gets up to refill his glass of water and Will steals his spot, nestling happily down into the sleep-warmed dip in the mattress and burying his face in the leftover imprint in his pillow. Hannibal returns and slips back in between the sheets. He is generous and does not begrudge Will the theft, smiling into the back of his neck as he curls around behind him. This is how they both drift off to sleep.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

> This one took some time because I was babysitting my folk's doggy. So, you know, I had like 4 pets to look after.

It starts with static.

Then, nodes of faint, eerie light pierce through the void.

There is a deep rumbling grunt followed by the sound of hooves rutting against earth. For a fleeting moment, he catches a glimpse of the stag in a dark grove preparing to charge and Will's eyes fly open.

Awake, he blinks in confusion. From his periphery, he observes Hannibal sleeping soundly and the dim room comes into blurry focus but there is a vague, unsettling voice in the back of his mind telling him something is wrong.

They aren't alone and whatever has joined them means him harm.

Quick to react to the new, unknown danger he moves to leap out of bed but quickly learns his legs refuse to follow their instinct. For a moment he gapes down at himself in disbelief, his body refusing to follow his brain's command, motionless beneath the sheets. Determined, he struggles to jolt his limbs back into action but again, there's not even a twitch. He brain screams in rage at the mutiny, yet, although he's immobilized by this foreign paralysis, he still feels the horrible, chilling sensation of being watched; examined like an insect pinned to a display.

The horror of his vulnerability clenches in his gut and beginning to hyperventilate-- panicked, Will tries to call out for help-- or at the very least force himself to make some sort of utterance-- anything to wake his companion, but every desperate cry battering out of him goes mute as if there's something obstructing his throat.

His gaze flicks to the darkest corner of the room where the presence seems to hearken and sure enough, the shadows lurking are no longer benign. He watches agape as they reshape into the giant stag.

The beast peers out at him, his dark, fathomless eyes gleaming like tiny, distant stars.

Will's heart hammers loudly in his chest, pounding in his ears as he sees it snort out a black, poisonous steam from it's nostrils before transforming into a raven.

The bird stretches, spreading out the entire span of it's wings, cawing a shrill, deafening squawk.

It flaps once and takes flight, soaring upward to the ceiling and Will watches in horror as it loops the perimeter before striking down, landing onto his chest like Fuseli's terrible, hovering gargoyle from *The Nightmare,* it's talons finding purchase and gripping him tightly.

The oppressive weight bears down on his chest, suffocating him and he gasps out one last desperate breath before the last of the air is crushed from his lungs. The world fades around him and he slips helplessly into oblivion.

From beyond the veil; from the black, infinite, timeless absence before creation, before even the birth of the leviathans lies a realm of eternal darkness.

For a long while, he is conscious here; conscious of his deprivation; of the absolution of nothingness and he wonders if he's dead.

Then, coalescing from this purgatory comes a hazy, wispy abstraction of trees and field and a yawning stretch of sky streaked by clouds.

What's tangible almost achieves a semblance of realism and when Will squints, the expressionist's brushstrokes remand their authentic austerity. With clarity comes recognition.

Only a few nights have passed since he was last brought here, but at that time, Will had no idea what to expect. He was a lone lamb led by a strange shepherd to a strange land; too wary for the prospective wolf lurking in the fold. The lamb, faced with the unknown, is too focused on guarding itself against potential danger, but lead the lamb to a pasture it's grazed before, the lamb feels free to roam.

The wisdom gained from experience; and in this case repetition, opens Will's mind. No longer restricted by apprehension, he quickly realizes he now has the capacity to really *see* when he looks.

Finally, he finds he can genuinely appreciate the *reason* for the subtle touches of comforting familiarity.

All the trees, the dirt, the grass, the soft synchronized chirping of crickets and the hares rustling in the underbrush beneath the dusky, timeless sky are akin to Virgil's *locus amoenus:* a safe and shady meadow of the mind; but although they are extractions from his own memory, the construction of these fragments feel built by the careful hands of someone else; the architect has fused himself into every fiber of this world's creation. This place is a *plagiarism* -- a derivative replication of Will's own private *hortus conclusus:* the metaphorical enclosed garden he keeps to retreat to.

Until recently, this sanctuary was Wolf Trap in it's entirety. Since, he's removed the house that no longer represents 'home', but he keeps the land. This approximation pays respect to that revision and the land is nearly unblemished in it's integrity.

Only, this place, no matter it's resemblance, no matter it's origin of ownership, does not belong to him-- he is an *invited* guest and he is acutely conscious of that.

It's a courteous homage, he realizes; a specific design specifically implemented with an intimate knowledge of the architect's intended guest. Will flushes with a warm sense of gratitude. His host wanted to encourage his comfort, and by extension, secure his trust.

But then, he considers that perhaps this is too generous an assumption. After all, it is easier to catch and slaughter the cosseted lamb than the skittish one.

"*You are hardly a lamb,"* he's reminded by a deep and sultry voice rippling through the ether.

Will's hackles raise instinctively as he feels the approach of another's presence. He doesn't hesitate to show his teeth.

"*The barbed fence pricks,"* the wendigo remarks, leaning casually against a tall oak. His expression is wounded, but it's superficial. He's far more amused than offended.

"I like what you've done with the place," Will retorts.

His host smiles proudly. "I am pleased you've noticed. You've done a fair reformation on your own I see," he praises. "You've uprooted the tumor. An impressive feat for a creature of habit such as yourself."

"Saves you the hassle, doesn't it?"

The Wendigo's grin is imperious and self-congratulatory. "And you no longer cherish any affection for your old home, even nostalgically?" he asks, folding his arms across his broad, jet-black chest. The question is rhetorical.

"Out with the old in with the new," Will replies parsingly. "There are reasons why the fond symbolism has *deserted* it's pedestal."

"I hear the accusation. It isn't as vague or subtle as you think," the monster scoffs. "Your strike is saturated in *piss, my pet.* I can taste the acrid bite of your resentment.

"I can *'taste'* yours back," Will snarls. "Wolf Trap has always been quite the splinter in your ego. Even altered, even knowing the reason for the alteration, it still *gnaws* at you."

"And yet, you observe how generously I cater to you," the wendigo defends. His presence suddenly flares in the threading of his fabricated world like a burst of electricity through thousands of woven wires with enough voltage to knock Will to his knees. "Do you feel that? This may resemble Wolf Trap, Will Graham, but only because I made it so."

Recovering quickly, Will pushes himself back up and watches the monster lay the palm of his hand against the tree. His black spindly claws scrape along the bark and the leaves turn a crisp brown, curling into themselves before dropping from their branches. It's a poignant threat.

“Lest we not forget all the many sacrifices I make to accommodate you.” *Lest we not forget how fragile life really is and how you've placed your lot in with me.*

“Why have you brought us here?” Will demands.

The wendigo shrugs. “We could always continue our little tête-à-tête back in the vacuum of empty space if you'd prefer, but I've the impression the nebulous quality of pure intangibility isn't your particular *cup of tea.* ”

Will shudders, recalling the few moments he'd been suspended there.

“I thought bringing you to somewhere you know so well would suffice as a suitable platform, it served last time. But then, you were but a *'lamb'*.”

“You can read my thoughts?”

“We *are* inside *your* head, Will.”

Will snorts. “Then I've inadvertently tripped open my ' *chakras'* to a demon.”

“I've many incarnations. A 'pishacha' suits relevantly,” the wendigo preens, affording him a dashing smile. “You flatter me.”

“If that's flattery, then you must be quite starved.”

“*Famished,*” he agrees, eyeing Will hungrily. Stalking forward, his charcoal lips spread into a predatory grin; every tooth is sharpened to a point.

“What do you want?” Will asks, unable to prevent his voice from trembling.

“I mirror this back to you*, dearest one,*” the wendigo purrs, approaching him confidently but cautiously-- unwilling to instigate a game of chase, but to the merit of his prey, there is no attempt to flee. “What do *you* want, *little lamb?*” He asks, stroking a claw down Will's chest until it rests just to the left of his sternum, pointed at his heart. “What is it *this* wants?”

“*You* brought me here,” Will counters, recoiling slightly.

“Do *not* deflect,” the monster commands, digging the sharp tip in between Will's ribs, inflicting a second's worth of sharp pain to remind him of the danger he toys with. “*'I've brought you here'* to ask you that specific question.”

“Why?” Will demands, frustrated.

“Because there remains a thing or two unresolved between us. Because you are an enigma and I admit, that intrigues me. For instance, I've often wondered what you look like flayed of your layers; what captive beast you keep hidden from all prying eyes, locked deep inside you.” The wendigo's black, fathomless eyes spark with desire, shuttering as he reaches up again to caress Will's cheek. “Such beauty should not be contained. *I would assist it's release*.”

Will tenses.

“You wonder, *what stays my hand? Why do I not simply open the cage?*” he muses, “Have you ever seen the Queen-of-the-Night bloom? Watching *you* bloom; watching you come into your own will be even more glorious for the wait.”

“Does this patience come at a cost?” Will daringly asks.

“I've invested much in you, *my lamb,* and I would take my pound of flesh,” the wendigo retorts. His thumb, resting over Will's cheek, jabs inward, piercing clean-through-- the point slipping out of Will's lips around the corner of his mouth until he's hooked like a fish.

Will utters a sharp, guttural gasp as he's reeled in; dragged forward by the claw through his face.

Blinded by his tears from the unbearable pain and choking on the blood pouring down his throat, he doesn't see his captor sweep down on him until he's devouring his mouth, clutching him tightly against himself. The wendigo sucks and laps out the flood before Will can drown in it before setting him back to his feet and immediately, staggering backward, Will's hands shoot up to his face but the pain is already gone. Shocked, he prods around his cheek, exploring where the puncture should be and this too is gone though the blood is still wet. He gapes at the monster incredulously.

“This is a dream,” he utters, aghast as the realization hits him.

“In dreams, nothing is static. Your vista would change. There are frequent, erratic transformations. There would be no regard for the linear progression you expect from reality,” the wendigo asserts. “Our dialogue would reflect this discordianism. Your brain would demand context and would prompt you to seek some semblance of structure. You would string together the incoherent fragments and everything would seem to make some sort of sense, however convoluted and weak that sense would be, but you would accept it anyway because you would have no conception of your own incapacitation.”

“By that logic, I might be doing that now without knowing it.”

“It's possible,” the wendigo replies charitably, “Although, your devil's-advocate attempt to flesh out the paradox infers a retention for critical reasoning. The extent of your agency is expressed in your liberty to interact so lucidly in an environment you accept to be conceptual. You would find yourself unable to so deftly execute these abilities had the revelation yet to fully permeate and thus you derail us into a tiresomely redundant tangent.”

“I've had dreams influenced by bleed-through before,” Will points out.

“But never quite so *bloody*,” the Wendigo chuckles, amused by his own joke.

“Then what is this?”

“You are waltzing away from the truth while tip-toeing across the tight-rope of twilight.”

Will frowns. “You've never been an intrusion. A semblance of a suggestion, perhaps,” he conjectures.

“You've cast me in a role and I've played out the part, *my little lamb*,” the wendigo tells him. “It is time to pull back the wool from your eyes. I am but an embellished construct, an interpretation of the blackest aspect of the soul you perceive lurking within another man. I encapsulate this darkness as a chimeric amalgamation that haunts you: I am the stag and the raven messenger that lassoed you to this moment to face the monster you see before you. I frighten you but you are enticed by me, do you wonder why?”

Will sucks in a breath, afraid to answer.

“You made me in *his* image, but *you* made me and to even conceive of me, you must have drawn from a source deep within yourself. It's very dark in there, isn't it, Will? You know it exists, and it claws to escape and you are afraid to indulge in it, but you *want* to, don't you?”

“I do,” Will reluctantly admits.

“You acknowledge me, therefore you acknowledge yourself. The time for hibernation is over. Spring has come for you, Will, now let yourself become. Feed, as nature intended.”

Bewildered, he watches the wendigo scrape a claw down the front of himself, splitting open the flesh. From the fallen casing steps out a boy covered in tarry, black blood: a mirror image of Will's child-self smiles peacefully at him, but the smile is dark. “Now you *see,*” he giggles before disappearing.

Will blinks at the vacant field, but he isn't alone.

The warm palm of a hand is placed gently on the small of his back before smoothing up his spine to rest on his shoulder. “You have found reconciliation with the monster inside you,” Hannibal whispers softly from behind him. “He is part of you again as he always has been. As I am now,” he explains, the dulcet tone of his voice inviting Will to turn around and face him. “Do you accept me?”

“I do,” Will confirms.

Hannibal smiles. “Do you accept what you are?”

Will doesn't reply. His child-self once again appears, standing behind Hannibal, but this time, he is clean, and his smile is pure.

He doesn't have to say anything but Will understands explicitly what he is; exactly what he represents. He serves as a reminder that he's *more* than the malignancy. Joining Hannibal will feed the monster he houses and will destroy this last remaining aspect of himself that is *good.*

The cliff calls to you for a reason, the boy tells him, and then he's gone.

“We will be each other's undoing,” Will warns Hannibal.

“Or, we will be each other's becoming,” his companion counters, cupping his chin.

Will smiles at him warmly, masking well his deceit.

“I look forward to it,” he tells him; the mongoose biding his time before he can swallow the snake.

Hannibal leans down to kiss him.

Will wakes.

His eyes blink open and he squints against the brightly lit room. Hannibal has drawn open the curtains and left the bedroom. Will reaches forward and touches the impression on the pillow. It's cold.

By the dresser he sees his clothing neatly folded.

After Will finishes buckling his belt, he smooths a hand down the front of his shirt and glances at himself in the mirror.

He's not surprised by the man he sees looking back. There is new determination there and renewed resolve. But, he also recognizes this is problematic: it's an altered vision from the reflection he might have seen had he looked at himself the night before.

The spell is broken. He knows the darkest part of himself now; what he's capable of and how he'll use it, but only the once. It will lend him the strength to finish the job his heart rebels against.

Will feels a stab of deep, profound sadness. The agony and the underlying malice pinch his face and darken his eyes. He replaces it with a cool veneer but this won't do either, he realizes, auditioning his expression to resemble whatever it might have looked like when he'd last looked upon Hannibal.

The soft, shy adoration; *the idolatry* is convincing only because there is still a remnant of that within him, but to know better than to believe the full picture almost makes him sick.

Hannibal knocks, rapping lightly on the door. “Are you decent?” he asks lightly.

Never, he doesn't say. “I'm dressed,” Will replies instead.

“Breakfast is ready,” Hannibal says, entering with a smile. His eyes are soft as he regards his guest, unaware of any change in him. “I hope you will find some appetite for oatmeal with raisins.”

Will mimics the expression he'd just practiced, returning his companion's smile as if he's just as pleased to see him. “Never been a fan, but it'll work.”

He follows Hannibal to the kitchen and joins him at the table where his meal has been courteously laid out.

“It's late,” Will accuses lightly, glancing at his watch.

“You didn't sleep very well, so I thought it best you sleep in,” Hannibal explains.

“How can you tell?” He asks through a spoonful of the oatmeal. It *isn't* very good; stale and mixed with water.

“The shadowy cast under your eyes,” Hannibal points out. “And the sheets twisted in a tangle at your feet this morning.”

“I'm not a very courteous bed companion,” Will shrugs. “Sorry.”

“You're anxious.”

Will shrugs again. “Dragon's kinda' lurking around the corner, isn't he.”

“Dwelling over-much on what worries you never helps. Let's veer toward something else,” he suggests.

“Like what?” Will asks, wiping his lips. “To be honest, I'm a little burned out. Lot of *talking,* you know?”

Hannibal's smile is pleasant. “Would you care to join me for a walk? There is a scenic path that trails down from the cliff.”

Will finds himself nervously crumpling his napkin into a ball in his fist under the table.

“The climb is a little steep but the way down is stepped for the novice alpinist,” he assures him.

After Hannibal is done collecting their plates and finishes washing and putting them away, he grabs his coat and hands Will his own.

The day is clear and sunny and the air is crisp.

When Hannibal is turned from him, Will looks at the cliff with hardened resolution and makes it a promise.

Zipping his jacket, he follows his guide down the path. The descent is not as harrowing as he'd expected and the journey is made mostly in silence, only occasionally interrupted for Hannibal to point out a particularly treacherous step. The crashing of the waves through the trees is louder the further down they go, and once they reach their destination more than an hour later, through the clearing the ocean splashes turbulently against the rocks.

Hannibal grins triumphantly out at the glistening blue water before glancing back at Will. “It's magnificent, isn't it? Spanning further than the eye can reach. At sea-level, the horizon is nearly five kilometers away. The earth reminds us how small we are. And then we look up at the sky, and remember how this whole world is but a speck in the universe.”

He takes a seat at the edge of a boulder and Will kneels to join him.

“It's humbling,” he agrees before darting a quick glances back behind them up at the summit. His eyes follow the drop to the sharp rocks jutting out from the water below before turning to look at his companion. “Have you come here often?”

“Only once,” Hannibal admits. His expression is more solemn than peaceful as he returns Will's gaze. “We could travel across this ocean, make ourselves a new home.”

Will finds himself unable to maintain eye-contact without revealing himself; exposing the depth of his regret that this will never be.

“Our time is exhausted here and the rest of the world beckons. We could travel, we could go anywhere, Will," Hannibal tells him. “We could reinvent our lives together."

There is a stretch of silence between them before Will realizes this is a prompt; a gentle, searching nudge. “That would be nice,” he replies a little too late. Unfortunately, his delay and his choice of words along with his tone lack any weight in their conviction. Hannibal's attention lingers on him for a second longer before releasing him from his scrutiny. He doesn't say anything else after that and it's then that it occurs to Will that there had been an implicit question underlying his offer; and in this, an expectation for a particular response Will had failed to deliver.

He trains his eyes hard at the ocean, knowing it's too late for damage-control.

“You consider reneging. You see a means to an end and you count the seconds until you can achieve it.” Hannibal's pronouncement is chilling and for a second, Will is convinced this is exactly where he'll die.

“However, you count those seconds, vacillating between confidence and cowardice; torn between doing what you believe is the right thing and doing the right thing for yourself. Are you selfish or selfless?” he muses.

Will knows better than to speak.

“I'm a man of my word, Will, and I believe you are a man of yours, even if you are not yet fully convinced of that fact. You will be. I have faith in you, Will. I have faith in the choice you will make.”

The *choice* he infers remains vague but there is an insinuation Will *will* choose him and he will obviously not disillusion Hannibal of this. What's more, he's succeeded in causing Will's resolve to waver again.

“Last night we came to the same stale-mate,” Will defends. “'You won't believe it till you see it'.”

“We will both have to wait and see how this story plays out,” Hannibal agrees. His tone is slightly exasperated although his light touch on Will's shoulder is gentle and his eyes are weary, but generous. “The difference is, today you awoke on the 'other side of the bed', metaphorically.”

“Literally, too,” Will smirks.

“That's why I'm a little offended by your turnabout,” Hannibal grins. “Was I an impolite bed-mate? Did I snore?”

“You don't snore.”

Hannibal smiles fondly and sighs, shaking his head. “Your capricious dangling is hard to keep up with,” Hannibal remarks, combing his fingers through Will's short-cropped curls. “You are very fortunate I have such an abundance of lenience for you.”

“I'm not as forgiving,” Will replies with frank honesty, “But you're lucky I try.”

“I am,” Hannibal agrees. “I can't erase the past for you, but I can try to make your future brighter.”

“*Endurable* would be a start.”

“Healing and purposeful. Perhaps pleasurable, if you're willing.”

Will wants all of that. So much, that he half-believes it when he smiles back at Hannibal and tells him so. “It's appealing,” he admits.

“There is little about the world I wouldn't try to reshape for you,” Hannibal shares, cupping his chin.

And that's the problem, Will knows. He leans in anyway.

Hannibal's lips are soft as they receive Will's.

He seals their fate with a kiss.

Like Judas.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> Has anyone ever compiled a list of animal comparisons Fuller makes? Hannibal is a snake, lion, wolf, stag, wendigo and Will is a mongoose, lion, hatching insect (?), lamb, etc.
>
> Imagine the crazy hybrid-creature thingies they would look like if you combined them all. I want this to be a thing.

The tide rolls in behind them, bringing in a crisp, invigorating chill to the air as they climb back up the cliff-side.

There is a renewed tension between them but their journey is silent, the steep incline of the winding, rocky trail commanding their full concentration. They reach the summit at the dwindling edge of late afternoon and return indoors.

Hannibal instructs Will to trade him his clothes for laundering and in exchange, hands him his robe for temporary modesty.

He doesn't watch Will undress, excusing himself to shower. There is no worded invitation to join him this time, but, although the offer still stands implicit, there is no obligation. This is in part, an exemption, granting Will time alone to reflect on his thoughts and he's grateful for the favor.

However, it's more than a favor too, he knows, pulling close the ties to Hannibal's robe around himself: it's a method of proving to Will that he won't pursue any persuasive tactics. He wants Will's decision to be made purely on his own; sans influence.

Will grimaces, balking a little at the arrogance . This is Hannibal's way of declaring that, yes, he has the upper-hand. He could undo Will with little but a simple touch: *this is all it would take to knock down the new wall you've built between us.*

Hannibal has already confronted this wall head-on; one blow-- one strike of his sledge hammer puts a crack through the whole thing, enough to start it's crumbling.

If he wanted, he could easily tear the whole thing the rest of the way down.

I could make you crave me beyond all other reason. If I so chose to, I could *make* you choose me.

He abstains by self-righteous virtue alone-- and by extension, he implies this is a virtue Will is lacking. He is saying: had you been less careful, had I been less astute, I would still be

ignorant to your recent change-of-heart. You would have gladly maintained this deception, so far as even following me just now into the shower: accepting the unspoken offer. You would use your naked body to convince me of your naked honesty but your soul would be cloaked; your intimacy an illusion.

But the offer was a dare-- *you could pretend, but I would be able to tell.* Will respects him too much to insult his intelligence. He'd mock his own by even trying.

Wandering out to the living room, he collapses into a comfortable recliner. Sagging back against the cushion his gaze wanders out the skylight to the setting sun. Though Hannibal refuses to influence him, he has encouraged a rebirth of his confliction. He's set Will's head spinning with it, but he's pinning his faith on a result that favors him.

He presents him with only two options: commitment or betrayal. Either choice is totaling. There is no middle-ground for compromise; no consolation-prize ending allowing them to part down disparate paths--not alive anyway. They've passed the 'point-of-no-return'.

But there has never been an exit-ramp. They've been careening down this highway from their very first introduction.

"I don't find you that interesting," He had lied.

"You will," Hannibal had promised.

And of course, he's kept to that promise ever since.

Burrowing down inside Hannibal's robe, he inhales deeply, smelling the other man in the downy fabric. In it's own way, intentionally or not, even this small intimacy of wearing an article of Hannibal's previously worn clothing is, in itself, a seduction.

Will looks up as Hannibal enters fully dressed, a light button down beneath a sweater beneath a jacket. Layers. Preparation. Will gets it.

His wet hair is combed neatly back, the effect lending him an air of severity. "I've pulled your clothing from the dryer," Hannibal informs him. "You should find them folded on the counter in the bathroom. Feel free to refresh yourself at your leisure. Supper should be ready in half-an-hour."

Will watches him fetch the leftover soup from the fridge and doubts it will take that long to re-heat. He assumes the extra time is meant for his comfort, but this flare of recent, excessive courtesy emphasizes the elephant in the room between them, making Will distinctly less comfortable.

After pushing himself out of his seat, he nods a word of thanks as he passes through the kitchen by Hannibal, but his host barely acknowledges the recognition, his expression sealed from Will as he immerses himself in his task.

This stops him. Will is unsure of his footing here. He feels like he's been ungrateful for everything, as if he doesn't deserve to be here anymore and he's overstaying his welcome but

his host is too polite to ask him to leave-- this is a huge disparity from yesterday, when Hannibal's sole intent seemed to be to make him feel as at home with him as possible.

Hesitating, he leans against the counter, watching the other man. He feels impelled to say something, but he isn't sure at what angle to attack. Hannibal could be very displeased with him right now—were Will in *his shoes*, he knows he would be.

He remembers Alana, the kiss he'd shared with her. For a fleeting moment she'd led Will to believe his feeling were reciprocated-- that this *thing* they had between them might work, but then she pulled a 180, and he knew that though she wanted to be with him, she knew better than to let herself. He no longer wonders if the remorse she'd felt was worse that the gutted feeling of resentment *he'd* felt, and no longer doubts that it was.

Hannibal ignores him, carrying on with his preparations and Will feels the disconnect between them like a dead wire hanging cold between two live, sparking fuses. Like some kind of sad, inept electrician he stares at the damage, perplexed by how to repair it. He knows Hannibal would grant him the privilege of trying, but even if he knew how, even though he wants to, he doesn't know if he *should*.

Will watches him finish pouring the contents of the container into the pot before washing his hands at the sink, all the while determinedly ignoring his guest, although the rigid tension in his shoulder's reveals just how acutely aware of him he really is. Inwardly cringing, Will realizes how long he's been standing here uselessly, like some kind of idiot and wracks his brain desperately for something to say, anything to fill this increasingly painful gap stretching between them. Staring down hard at the shimmering flecks in the granite counter he feels himself flush in embarrassment under the weight of Hannibal's judging eyes trained on him for a long, unmerciful minute while he flounders helplessly, waiting for him to formulate an explanation for why he's stalling, but he knows everything he can think of will sound artificial.

For a moment, he thinks Hannibal is going to let him drown, but at the last second he throws him a life-preserver. “Will, go,” he orders, taking pity on him. “Or I'll have to take the soup off the heat before it curdles.”

Will's hands wring at the tie to his robe beneath the counter top out of view. “I just wanted to-- I don't know,” he explains at a loss, the aimless excuse dying on his tongue. He glances up, abashed. “I'm sorry, I'm bad at this.”

Hannibal's eyes narrow at him. “Will, stop. You should not speak aloud anything you haven't entirely thought out. Save yourself now the trouble of rescuing yourself from it later,” he advises carefully before shooing him off with a short exasperated look.

Will's ears are hot as he excuses himself, gathering up what little pride he has left intact and tries very hard not to look like he's running away like a scolded pup with his tail tucked between his legs.

It occurs to him a little too late that they're meant to be in some kind of intercession still. Hannibal was not ignoring him out of spite or disappointment, he was giving Will more time

to think by himself-- without his involvement. Reflecting back on his obtuse misinterpretation of the magnanimous gesture shames him even more for it's generosity.

The bathroom is still steamed up when Will enters but there's still an abundance of hot water to soak beneath. He eyes an exfoliant in a small bottle on the built-in shelf as he lathers himself and out of curiosity, applies a dollop of the cleanser to his soapy washcloth before experimentally rubbing it over his chest. He's surprised by how cathartic the abrasive feels as it sands against him and continues on, aggressively scrubbing himself down with the rest of the bottle's contents until he's raw and the water stings as it hits his skin, but still, even this fails to slough off the clinging grime of his self-disgust.

He's a thankless, stupid bastard.

But, he's not a *selfish* one .

If he were selfish, there wouldn't be an option. He wants to be with Hannibal and Hannibal wants to be with him, however, deep down he can't ignore Jack's voice whispering in his ear: *'Hannibal is a stain on humanity that only you can remove, you will do what you know must be done.'*

He agrees with Jack. The Chesapeake-ripper, the copy-cat killer is a wolf in sheep's clothing with delusions of supremacy. But underneath the surface, whatever toxin is pumping through his veins has made him too dangerous to walk among the herd and he should be put down.

'You hypocrite,' he imagines Hannibal countering. *' First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.'*

He can't disagree, he's always been but a hair-trigger away from committing any number of atrocities and with or without Hannibal nudging him there, he's still a loose grenade. There is a time-bomb inside of Will, an angry lion begging for release. He's let it taste blood and now it thirsts for more.

Hannibal deserves him. They deserve each other and neither deserve to be spared.

But then, *what does he owe this world*-- and doesn't it owe *him* more?

And that's the crux of it. He doesn't have an internal gauge to measure this and he distrusts everyone else's so he doesn't know, but he does know it's a heavy wager Hannibal has made, staking his life to his choice. A little bitterly, Will resents the onus of this responsibility he never asked for and wonders if the man truly understands the uncertain hand he's betting on.

Hannibal is either very confident or very delusional, Will decides, chuckling softly to himself. He hears the creeping edge of madness inside his head and thinks: *but then, so am I.*

Over supper they dine mostly without exchange, instead, watching the last light of day dim in a mellow finale to the soft serenade of violins, the strings shivering solemnly in the background. Will can't tell if it's Bach or Beethoven-- he's more of a *Rolling Stones* type himself.

When the last sliver of fire is pinched out at the lip of the horizon by the heavy cloak of nightfall, Hannibal smiles at him serenely. “By great fortunate or some, mysterious kismet I've been blessed to watch you grow, Will. It's an experience not unlike how I've often imagined fatherhood-- mankind's greatest pleasure is to give unto his scion. It becomes his *legacy*. In many ways, I bear the same pride for you,” he admits. “At times I've been able to guide you, and so far as I've witnessed, you've adapted and expanded into an exquisite medley of all your circumstances: every trauma you've endured, every lesson you've learned, every triumph you've celebrated and every passion you've dreamt after. In the end, wherever you arrive, whatever you are, it will be of your own design.”

“You've said as much before. You said, you could never 'entirely...*predict'* me,” Will points out. “Am I still 'beyond' you?”

“To encompass a full understanding of everything you are is as far-fetched an ambition as netting a shooting-star. You burn bright and hot and I reach for you but you evade capture.”

“Gotta' keep it interesting, or you might get bored,” Will retorts with a small, self-deprecating laugh.

“You still yearn for my guidance,” Hannibal realizes sagely. “You long for me to remove the burden of freewill. *Poor Atlas* .”

Will scowls, not fond of the comparison, however apropos, nor the trivialization of his very real struggle.

“'Atlas was permitted the opinion that he was at liberty, if he wished, to drop the earth and creep away; but his opinion was all that he was permitted'.”

"Thank you, *Kafka*, ” Will clips back.

"You already know what I want, but my opinion isn't relevant and I can't tell you what you want if I don't know what that is. The sad irony being, you can't tell me what it is if you don't know either.”

"Want and need oft' forget their lonely friend '*ought have*'. ”

“And what ought you have?” Hannibal asks sincerely but guarded. “Or is this about *more* than yourself?”

Will doesn't answer, staring out the window, but the darkness of the night is so impenetrably black that the dim light from the kitchen mirrors off the surface of the glass, obscuring the details of whatever's on the other side and all he really sees is a reflected image of two men sitting at a table having a calm discussion in a remote cottage far away from all the rest of civilization.

“You have a hero-complex,” Hannibal concludes.

"Gods and heroes live in an untouchable realm from us.”

"But sometimes we borrow their images and coexist on the ground: brothers in arms.”

“Sometimes,” Will agrees.

Hannibal stands, pushing in his chair to clear their dishes from the table and Will joins him. When he's finished, he puts his hands in the pockets of his trousers and gazes back outside while Hannibal retrieves a bottle from the wine-cooler beneath the counter.

“You have a bad habit of defining morality by the standards of others,” he admonishes, glancing at Will. "'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good,' ” Hannibal instructs, catching his eyes in the window's reflection.

In the distortion of the glass and the warm hued glow of the muted lights behind them, they glisten the same color as a ray of light distilled through long-aged, smokey amber scotch in a crystal snifter or slow-burning embers at the base of the fire. Will can see the soul rising from within, like the angel-cast-down again ascending. He's beautiful and terrible and Will has never been this close to perfection and evil personified in the same stroke before and he kind of wants to touch the chimera and see if it's real and as icy cold and strong as it's pale marble surface suggests.

“You're playing games with yourself in the dark of the moon,” Hannibal surmises from his silence.

Will doesn't reply but keeps firm hold of his companion's gaze, matching his cool, emotionless expression.

“It wasn't surprising that I heard from the Great Red Dragon,” Hannibal says.

Unfocusing his eyes from his own reflection, Will stares outside distractedly, his thoughts a maelstrom tangled in the darkness.

“Was it surprising when you heard from him?”

Will turns back around, facing Hannibal. “Yes and no,” he replies enigmatically.

Hannibal procures two glasses, inspecting them for any unwanted smudges. “You intend to watch him kill me?”

“I intend to watch him *change* you,” Will clarifies.

Hannibal frowns unhappily at one of the glasses before setting it back down. “My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will,” he admits, pushing the corkscrew into the top of the bottle.

Will finds himself dryly amused. “If you're partial to beef products, it is inconvenient to be compassionate toward a cow.”

Hannibal chuckles softly as he pops the cork. He sniffs it, approves, and sets it aside. After decanting the wine he gathers the two glasses and strolls back over to Will. “Save yourself, kill them all?” he asks, handing him a glass before pouring the wine into it.

“I don't know if I can save myself. Maybe that's just fine,” he replies honestly, his voice sounding a little far away from himself somehow.

Hannibal's expression is mildly concerned by his disturbing response and he sighs, pouring wine into his own glass. “No greater love hath man than to lay down his life for a friend,” he muses, raising his glass before taking a sip.

Partially out of intuition and partially due to the fleeting little flicker of movement behind the reflection, Will realizes they're no longer alone.

“He's watching us now,” he informs Hannibal evenly.

Hannibal eyes fasten to Will's. “I know.”

Chapter 15

There is a sharp blast as a bullet pierces through the window, shredding through Hannibal and out again from the wineglass in his hand.

Will flinches back from the exploding spray of blood, dark red wine and shards of shattered glass slicing through the air like shrapnel.

Hannibal collapses to the floor as Dolarhyde bursts through the fray; landing in an athletic crouch on the floor before them. He straightens, aiming his gun at Will. “Don't run,” he warns him softly, “I'll catch you.”

Will makes no attempt, a strange sense of numb settling over him. *The calm before the storm.*

“Hello, Francis,” Hannibal pants, looking up at his assailant, his hands pressed against his wound.

Dolarhyde stares back at him, his eyes sparkling with wonder at his intended victim. “Hello, Doctor Lecter.”

Will takes a sip of his wine. It's mellow heaviness lingers on his tongue, heating him from inside as he quietly sets down his glass to free his hands while his present company is distracted.

“I'm so happy you chose life, Francis. Suicide... is the enemy,” Hannibal gasps out from the floor, his breathing labored as he sags against the cabinet supporting him upright. “You were seized by a fantasy world with the... brilliance and freshness and... immediacy of childhood. It... took you a step beyond alone .” His pronouncement however, is superfluous to Dolarhyde.

“I'm going to film your death, Doctor Lecter, as dying, you meld with the strength of the Dragon,” he informs him setting up his camera before adjusting the focus of his lenses.

Hannibal is impressed. “It's a glorious and rather... discomforting idea,” he replies honestly and a little repulsed as the idea fully permeates.

“Watching the film will be wonderful,” Dolarhyde declares, fixing his intense gaze back on his prize. “But not as wonderful as the act itself.” Hannibal's eyes find Will's as Will reaches behind his back to unsheath his knife but the exchange is caught and their enemy, quicker than lightening lunges at him.

Will sputters out in surprise as his own stolen blade is stabbed through his cheek. Cruelly, Dolarhyde twists it, mangling his flesh before he leaves the knife where he stuck it, wrapping his hands around Will's throat. Choking on blood and suffocating as the powerful grip compresses his windpipe, Will feels his feet leave the ground as he's lifted up by the man's incredible, inhuman strength.

Dolarhyde's dark, wild gaze meets his, his violent eyes glittering with rage before he tosses him out of the house through the broken window.

Will grunts as he hits the ground hard, blinded by agony as his attacker closes in, dragging him back up by his shirt. Spitting out a thick mouthful of blood, a jolt of adrenaline shocks through his veins and he comes alive. Yanking the knife from his face he buries it deep into Dolarhyde's thigh; hobbling him before he can get purchase on Will enough to pin him down and finish him. The monster roars, hideous with rage and jerks it back out stabbing him a second time. When he pulls it out again, blood spurts from the wound--from both of their wounds, splattering over the ground, and it's almost slick as Will wrestles away, aided by Hannibal, lunging on Dolarhyde from behind, stabbing him in the back.

He rears up with a feral cry, grunting as he pulls out the blade, stabbing it into his assailant before throwing him off. Hannibal tumbles forward, rolling into the embankment and Will watches him, as winded by the impact of his multiple injuries and covered in blood, he struggles back up to his hands and knees, but the effort is taxing. Hannibal's face is pinched in pain, but his expression forgets his own quickly, turning to worry for Will as he spares a quick glance in his direction before fumbling to remove the knife wrenched in his shoulder.

The Great Red Dragon rises then, towering over them both, commanding their attention with a terrible snarl, his impressive wings expanding to the blackest heavens in their fullest glory as he stalks after his downed prey. Hannibal staggers back up as the Dragon wraps his fists around his throat, strangling him.

Will comes to his rescue from behind, thrusting his knife into the Dragon's lower back, twisting it into his kidney. He wheezes out a harsh, guttural grunt of pain and surprise, releasing Hannibal before pivoting back around, swinging at his attacker. He lands a solid punch to his gut and Will heaves, winded by the impact but undeterred, he leaps back at him. This time, the monster's iron fist connects a sharp strike to his jaw and Will hears the bones crunch as his teeth smash together, the force of the blow sending him hurdling back to the ground. Hannibal tries in vain to take advantage of the window of opportunity, but the Dragon spins back around just as fast, savagely kicking him hard in the sternum.

Hannibal lands hard, and the neither Will nor the Dragon expect he'll get up again. The monster turns back to finish Will, and dazed, Will gazes back up at him grimly, clenching his knife tightly in his white-knuckled, blood-stained fist.

This is the end, he thinks.

And then, Hannibal springs out of the shadows wielding a hatchet, a ravaged, avenging angel consecrated in blood. Their eyes connect for a brief moment-- *this is for you, Will; for Us* , his eyes convey before he buries the axe in the Dragon's side. A black sheet of hot blood hits Will across the face, and as the beast howls, stumbling forward clutching his side-- and, as Hannibal swings back the hatchet once more, Will lunges forward, burying his blade into the Dragon's gut.

In a primal, synchronous dance; the oldest dance , they seduce each other-- professing their love in the glistening sheen of blood-shed as together they slay the beast.

The axe cuts the Dragon behind his knee-- slicing through the tendons. Will crouches before he attacks, his eyes finding Hannibal's again: *This is our becoming*, he replies.

The world goes deaf, and all Will hears is the intense thrumming, pumping of his heart, beating like drums inside his ears. Energy buzzes through his veins-- out the tips of his fingers and the top of his head until there's an aura, like a halo, of clarifying purpose all immersive and all encompassing; he feels more alive than he's ever felt before— as if he'd been born to live exactly this moment.

Hannibal leaps onto the Dragon's back forcing him into a stranglehold while Will charges, sticking his knife into his chest, again and again. Blood jets from his wounds as he rears back before dropping to his knees, defeated. His wings expand for the last time before the Dragon releases him. As it leaves, it steals his soul along with it and Francis Dolarhyde collapses to the ground, his blood pooling around him reflecting back the glow of the pale moon overhead. As the final fixture his eyes rest upon, it's serves as a befitting coda.

At the edge of the cliff, Will glances up at the sky, closing his eyes before looking back down at himself. He has taken more than a man's life and he feels radiant with it-- euphoric as he stares at the wet blood on his hands. “It really does look black in the moonlight,” he muses, awed.

Hannibal helps him to his feet.

“See?” he asks, holding Will up as much as Will is holding him. “This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.”

Will clutches Hannibal, exhausted and in so much pain but none of it matters. Hannibal's eyes glitter down at him tenderly; adoring.

“It's beautiful,” Will tells him, pulling him into an embrace. They lean into each other, feeling the power of their connection in it's entirety in this perfect moment. Their lips brush in the softest, intimate kiss and Will lays against him, tucking his face against the warmth of his neck under his chin. He feels Hannibal finally rest his head on his shoulder, feels the way he revels in Will accepting himself, accepting him — them and Will pulls him in closer until he knows there are no more boundaries, until it's impossible to tell between their heartbeats and then--

He pulls them both over the edge of the cliff.

They fall together.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sconces are lit and the dim flicker of candlelight glows warmly, imbuing the dining room with an ambiance of romance, an effect created specially for the esteemed guest- *cum*-hostess.

Bluebeard's wife sits at the head of her elegantly set table and in the center lays the entree on it's silver platter. The roast, tied together with long, crisped banana leaves steams hot from the oven, ready to be carved and served.

She appears unaware of her captor's quiet approach and Will waits, lingering at the entrance half-hidden in the dark just beyond the opened french-doors looking in, marveling at her stunning, polished beauty; admiring Hannibal's craftsmanship; envious of the artist's talent for painting a perfect portrait in the flesh.

While the master is occupied finishing up tidying in the kitchen, his protege reflects on his skill unable to suppress a twinge of jealousy. Bedelia presents a radiant vision posed against the resplendent backdrop Hannibal has constructed for her and Will feels an irrational twist of hatred for the devotion his companion has invested into her arrangement, wondering if she deserves it-- wondering if she's even grateful for the attention she's received since they've arrived.

Pale blonde tresses fall loosely over her shoulders, the shimmering curls framing her face; drawing attention to her stunning, sculpted features-- enhanced by expertly applied cosmetic accents; hues selected by Hannibal with careful particularity to both suit the occasion, lending loving emphasis to her innate beauty as well as crafting an adjudging caricature of Bedelia as the femme-fatale he both despises and reveres.

Smoky charcoal eye-shadow dramatically defines her eyes against her flawless, porcelain complexion; an effect that would cause startling contrast were it not for the warm blush of expertly applied rouge to her cheeks to camouflage the anemic pallor of her recent blood-loss. Will can smell the simmering aroma of au-jus infused with thyme fragrant in the air pouring out from the kitchen as Hannibal finishes cooking what he's collected from her.

Ruby-red lipstick the color of crushed cranberries paints her mouth, the same stain as the metaphorical, scarlet-letter he's pinned her with. She fits it in it's truest essence better than the person-suit Hannibal had stripped himself of for her. In absence of a better option, searching to fill the desperate, lonely hole Will had opened inside him, he'd tried her on for size, and ever the spectacular actress, she'd almost convinced him of her sympathy, but in her eyes, he must have always seen the underlying malice; the contempt for his credenda she pretended to parallel.

Will makes note to later remind Hannibal to split her tongue so she may better resemble the snake she truly is.

Bedelia's opiate-hazed, pale blue eyes glisten under long, thick lashes that flutter against her cheek like little black butterfly wings as she looks down at herself. He sees her notice, for the first time, the ravishing evening gown she's been dressed in, watching her through guarded eyes as she appreciates the glimmering golden riviere adorning her neck with a small, hushed gasp. Opulent gifts bestowed to her in worshipful tribute.

Obviously counting on her captors' temporary negligence, Will catches her slyly remove her fork from her place-setting and softly snorts to himself, amused by her intrepid will to survive in spite of her hopeless situation. But then, as he watches her grip the utensil in her fist in her lap beneath the table, he sees something more, something beyond the brief flare of fury that twists her otherwise sedated expression-- a bleak resignation dimming her eyes that compels him to reconsider her motivations.

She has *accepted* her fate, but she'll be *damned* if her captors' forget her when they're finished: she will wound Hannibal- leave him with a lasting reminder. For a moment Will's taken aback-- impressed by her tenacity.

Bedelia's gaze flicks up to him, instantly finding Will where he hides lurking in the shadows. Her eyes lock to his, holding them steadily and he sucks in a sharp breath, realizing that she's known he was there all along. Wordlessly, she conveys she knows he's perfectly aware of what she's got hidden up her proverbial sleeve and she isn't asking for his permission to carry through with her plans because she knows he'll let her anyway. Although he finds himself initially startled by not only the audacity of Bedelia's challenge but her quick assessment assuring them both of his easy compliance, Will releases a small gasp, alarmed by the accuracy of her presumption and by what this reveals about *himself*.

The fall must have been truly transformative after all. The Dragon's blood, wet on his hands had *awakened* him, but it was not enough to impose itself over the profound integrity of his righteousness.

In that moment, exactly what he'd *known* needed to be done and what he'd genuinely *wanted* existed in paradoxical conflict. But then, burying his face in Hannibal's neck he had closed his eyes and wept as he'd seen all the many faces of both friends and enemies and strangers certain to die if he chose to renege, but he wasn't weeping for them, he was weeping for the choice they were forcing him to make. In the end, they won, and although his heart rebelled against it-- although he felt it breaking into a million, irretrievable pieces, he'd twisted his fists into the fabric of Hannibal's ruined shirt, taking consolation in the idea that the ends would justify the means and pulled them both over the ledge.

His selfless sacrifice was meant to right the universe, but when he'd opened his eyes, still very injured but alive and intact-- when he'd learned that Hannibal had survived as well, instead of feeling gutted by failure he found himself rejoicing with relief. He never spoke of it, but he wondered if Hannibal knew, if that was why afterward, instead of abandoning him or seeking retribution-- Hannibal had rescued his would-be assassin, knitted him up and nursed him back to health. As if this was why he slept by his side and had quieted his wildest nightmares through several long, arduous nights-- as if he'd forgiven him-- or as if there

never had been anything to forgive. As if he'd known all along, Will needed to symbolically kill them both before he could literally come into his own beside him.

Toward the last of those nights, as they lay recovering, before their most grievous of physical wounds had mended allowing them to take off again and leave this tiny, desolate den of wherever they were to leave for wherever they had to, Will had woken to find Hannibal curled around him in their small, shared cot, fast asleep. Turning over, he wound his ankles around his companion's, quietly threading together their fingers and watched him, counting his even exhalations. Hannibal's breath wafted warmly into Will's face, a little stale but not unpleasant-- a hint sour like he'd taken another strong pull from one of the bottles of brandy they'd found stashed just before passing out, and Will, also a little drunk still from earlier, found his mind wandering away from his perusal of the finer points of Hannibal's features, dimly obscured by the dark-- to the reason they were still here. He'd felt something stir inside him then-- the tingling nascence of a new, emerging perspective. It occurred to Will, that either the god's of chaos unquenchable, discordian thirst to curse the world had carved his and Hannibal's existence into the hardest of stone or there was no fate or sentient authority, and the world was as neutral and arbitrary as the most absentee of hosts.

It was as if there was no point-- no purpose , he realized, only free-will. There was himself and Hannibal and all the other billions of Earth's inhabitants, and they were all adrift and meandering about in blindfolds, desperate for meaning; for direction-- all deceiving themselves that there was any to find in the first place.

It was the dawning of a new era. It was as if he'd been baptized by the sea and delivered back to pursue the destiny he'd almost succeeded in denying himself. Only, he finally understood there was no destiny. This revelation was Will's liberation.

Finally, he could embrace exactly what he'd always been, no holds barred.

This is why he can now embrace finding pleasure in watching Bedelia squirm like a fox with her paw caught in a snare; she'd thought herself sly-- eluding the hunter for this long, but now, having finally tripped into his trap, she snarls with outrage. The hound torments her, wagging his tail-- he finds her suffering exquisite. She bares her teeth, promising him that she'll bite the hunter when he comes, but when he does, she'll trick him, pretending docility. The hunter won't suspect a thing until her teeth gnarl through his hand.

Will feels a small burst of excitement at the prospect.

The hound won't bother warn his master when he comes. He'll play the fox's silent accessory-- not because he sympathizes with her plight, but because of the wrath she'll undoubtedly incur-- this hunter is ruthless and his hound *enjoys* the bloodsport.

It's a win-win.

Will nods back at her meaningfully; committing to be her accomplice. *Alright*, he tells her, feeling his grin spread across his face, pulling at the stitches, *I'll let you play.*

Bedelia's eyes narrow at him, considering his angle but Will is a quick study and she figures it out almost immediately. He sees her lip quiver a little before she turns away, returning her

gaze to her leg, presented to her on the table. The fox knows whatever minor, petty revenge she can dish out she'll be getting away with only because the hound is letting her. Not only does this put a damper on whatever gratification she hopes to achieve, but it also means the hunter may forget he'd meant to be merciful and skin her alive.

Will watches with burgeoining enthusiasm as she fully realizes what she'll be inviting upon herself, watching her clutch her thigh where her IV has been placed. Next time-- the next limb is not the only thing Hannibal might cut off, and Will doesn't think she likes the idea of amputation sans her little pain-killing cocktail. He doubts he'll even give her a wooden spoon to chomp on as he saws through the bone.

In the same instant, he realizes they both are sharing the same thought, almost able to hear the grinding of the metal grating through her femur. Will has to reign in his grin lest it split a stitch, not particularly relishing the idea of how displeased his doctor will be if he has to delay supper to fix him up again.

This is after all, the meal he'd promised Will, and it means a lot to both of them.

Bedelia glances back up again, glaring at him through narrowed eyes and gritted teeth, projecting all the force of her unbridled hatred out at him and Will eyes widen, impressed by the shrewdness of her insight that still remains so unfailing in it's clarity. She won't give him the satisfaction, he realizes, smirking a little as he watches her deliberately replace the fork beside her plate on the table.

He's a little disappointed, but then, he does consider he has their feast to look forward to and in any case, he finds he no longer entirely begrudges her the small courtesies she's been afforded nor the significant effort Hannibal's devoted to her presentation this evening. She's not a worthy rival, but even still, she's cleverly twisted her little knives under his ribs and Will can't help but feel a small blossoming of respect for her that she so ably managed to. He owes it to her to ensure she gets everything she deserves.

“You watch her closely,” Hannibal observes, having approached from behind unannounced. “I can almost smell your animosity.”

Will shivers, closing his eyes as his companion places the warm palms of his hands over his shoulders, stepping in close behind him.“What does it smell like?” he asks breathlessly.

Hannibal leans in, inhaling a deep whiff of Will from the back of his neck, just below the fringe of his hair-line. Will feels his nose press against his scalp and trembles with the rush of lust. “Like the molten scoria of a freshly struck-match. As if you'd incinerate anything you might touch at this moment,” Hannibal replies after long consideration.

“Like Midas-- were his gilding hands replaced by benzene torches?” Will snorts.

“Your imagination is fertile with all the many ways you'd like to dispose of her,” Hannibal whispers in reply, his lips grazing over the shell of his ear.

“She looks lovely,” Will acknowledges, admiring his companion's work.

“And so do you,” he hums back, tugging a little on Will's lapel for emphasis. “You clean up nicely. But then, I've seen you in tatters and you're every bit as enticing.”

Will flushes hotly, feeling his blood race down, filling him out in the front of his pants. Self-consciously he brushes a hand over himself, as if he's merely smoothing out a crease. “You've spent time on her,” he points out, unable to keep a hint of resentment from coloring his tone.

Hannibal's fingers squeeze his shoulder's reassuringly. “Bedelia earns our veneration and we honor her for it.”

“The form your *honor'* takes does not stray far from debasement,” She interjects glaring at them coolly.

“Ah, and supper speaks,” Hannibal replies drolly, ambling around Will into the dining room. He holds out a hand, gesturing for his guest to join him. “I think it asks to be eaten,” he chuckles, politely pulling out Will's chair for him to take a seat before circling the table to take his own.

“At least you're able to resist pawing your toy for a second to feed him,” Bedelia retorts scornfully.

Hannibal ignores the barb and raises his glass. “A toast,” he announces, looking warmly at Will, “To a new beginning.”

Will clinks his glass against his companion's. “To our new life, wherever the road takes us,” he adds.

“To taking that road together,” Hannibal completes before taking a sip.

Bedelia's sigh is dramatic in it's exasperation. “Spare me your amorous drivel and get on with it.”

Hannibal ignores her remark and stands up to carve the roast, first removing the garnishes. He serves them each a thick slice beside a helping of dressings before drizzling over the top a coulis of steamed au-jus.

Will lifts a bite to his mouth, watching his companion do the same. They both close their eyes savoring the rich burst of flavor. When he reopens them, he sees Hannibal's heavy-lidded gaze has fixed onto him and his expression is covetous, reawakening his arousal. He's thankful for the cover of the table.

“I think he wants to *eat you* more than he enjoys eating me,” Bedelia observes, raising a manicured eyebrow at Will.

“I don't doubt Will might taste as splendid as yourself,” Hannibal responds on his behalf. “Something perhaps after the meal to leave the tongue with a sweet finishing note.”

“Like a dessert? You compare your pet to a confection,” Bedelia disapproves, “I'd have thought you beyond such cloyingly nauseating metaphors.”

Hannibal stares at her evenly. “More fittingly, a *digestif*, ” he clarifies.

“A strong finish to the evening, Hannibal. You always enjoyed that,” she muses. “He rides you hard into the mattress, pumps you full and leaves you warm and sated?”

Will hides his scowl behind his glass, taking a long drink of his wine. Unable to keep from wondering just how many nights Hannibal shared that way with her in Italy.

“Your jealousy is a ripening fruit,” Hannibal tuts after swallowing another bite. “Like a new olive plucked from the tree, there is a sharp piquancy of bitterness. Certainly, an acquired taste.”

“Fortunately you've acquired that taste.”

“And to my misfortune, it's one that lingers unpleasantly afterward,” Hannibal shoots back. “We are fortunate I've marinated you first.”

“Yes, you did '*marinate'* me first,” she points out. “Do you taste yourself in me, Hannibal? Have you improved my flavor?”

Her comment is meant to directly nettle Will and achieves the success it seeks. Hannibal apologetically refills his wineglass and is certainly more generous the second-time around.

“You are becoming increasingly vile, Bedelia,” he warns her.

“Am I spoiling your appetite ?” She asks insolently before taking her first taste of her own leg. Will watches her chew slowly, a glazed look of indifference in her eyes. “Not the preparation I'd have chosen.”

Hannibal's lips curl down at her remark. “Though I'd taken into respect both your epicurean palate as well as your personal contribution into the design of this evening's menu, I must remind you that tonight is for our other guest and although I'd genuinely hoped you'd feel welcomed by your inclusion, *my dear*, if you aren't enjoying yourself, kindly abstain from dining, and sit here civilly.”

“You mean *'quietly'.* You never take constructive criticism very humbly,” she sighs.

“If you cannot find your manners, I will find them for you,” he warns.

“You see for yourself how snotty he gets when he doesn't get his way,” Bedelia huffs, sharing a sympathetic look with Will.

He doesn't altogether disagree and grins a little in complicity before turning back to Hannibal. “You feed the bitch it comes back for more,” he shrugs.

Hannibal breathes out a small, exhausted sigh as he picks up his wineglass. He stares at it for a minute before taking a sip and sets it back down. “Let us not bite the hand that feeds us,” he cautions them both.

“May I have seconds or should I save room?” Will asks, changing the subject, hoping to defuse the tension.

“I wouldn't worry. Dessert is light.”

“And if you're still hungry later, I'm sure he'll gladly help *fill you up*, ” Bedelia drawls.

“Crude,” Hannibal smirks, “I'd rephrase it, myself, but she isn't incorrect.”

Will chokes a little on his wine and feels his ears grow hot.

“He's *precious*,” she sneers.

“The food's surprisingly chatty, isn't it?” Will asks, sparing a glare at Bedelia.

“Tiresomely so,” Hannibal agrees. “If she's putting you off your supper, I might suggest upping the dosage of her drip,” he offers, passing a remote control across the table to Will. “Toggle up and she sleeps, but not too much or we'll have to freeze the rest of the meat.”

“It's better fresh,” Will nods.

“Toggle down and she screams. If you do so too long, however, she's likely to go into cardiac arrest. An animal that's slaughtered when it's stressed makes the meat too tough,” he explains. “In my opinion, I'd advise you to aim toward heavier sedation, I think we both could use a respite from the inane jaw-flapping she's accosted us with.”

“ Juvenile ,” Bedelia scolds.

“Prudence,” he cautions her, “Or I'll snip out your raving tongue and serve it up for a nice charcuterie. I think it would pair well with a dry cabernet.”

“Better apt to be split,” Will adds, remembering he'd thought of doing so earlier.

Hannibal acknowledges the idea with approval. “I see a certain... *serpentine* resemblance,” he agrees examining their captive with cool disdain.

Bedelia lays down her utensils and folds her used napkin, setting it neatly across her plate. “I think I'm done,” she mutters.

“I think you are too,” Will chirps back, pumping her up to her eyeballs in morphine.

They watch her in mutual silence as she quickly surrenders to unconsciousness, her chin dropping against her chest, before sharing an almost embarrassed look of relief.

Will grins to realize he isn't the only one she's able to put so on edge.

“Her words have a way of cutting under the skin,” Hannibal admits.

“Speaking of cutting things...have you much practice with sculpture?”

“Depends on the medium,” he replies looking closely at Will. “I assume your question is more than random speculation?”

“There is an ice-sculpting show in a week from now in the downtown park market-square, would you consider making an anonymous submission?”

“A saw-scaled viper, coiled and ready to attack,” Hannibal muses, taking wing with the idea. “It's an inspired notion.”

“Thank you,” Will replies proudly.

“Have you any objection to skipping over dessert this evening?”

“What do you suggest?” he asks, his stomach flipping with anticipation.

“We run out to nearest meat-packing plant and obtain a large block of ice, come home, put on our gloves and prepare the bone-saws.”

Will grins. “You say the most romantic things.”

Chapter End Notes

maybe someday I'll get to write some smut again, but damn if these guys will ever let me get around to it.

Chapter 17

Bach Goldberg Variations plays softly in the background, the gently played piano's melody lending a calmly studious air to the quiet din of the living room.

Will relaxes with his feet propped on an ottoman, idly browsing the internet on his new phone Hannibal had provided in lieu of the one he'd been forced to discard to avoid tracking. The wine has had a fuzzing effect on his focus, but there's a subtle thrum of energy in the room keeping him too alert to drift off as Hannibal sits adjacent, perusing through several illustrations from a book borrowed from Bedelia's library while sketching out some designs on a few pieces of loose leaf.

Will is eager to see what his companion has drawn, but he knows most artists tend to dislike sharing their work prematurely, so he decides to be courteous and patiently wait until Hannibal is ready to show him.

He spares a look across the room at Bedelia who sits perched in her wheelchair, sleeping off the opiates by the fireplace, her delicate wrists bound to its arms.

She groans, groggily wakening and he catches her eyes widen a little in bewilderment as she notices her restraints. He observes her confusion turn to resignation as her gaze drags across the room, realizing her nightmare is real as her eyes settle wearily on Hannibal before latching back onto Will's.

“There are perks to death,” she quietly informs him.

Will decides to humor her comment, returning her eye-contact, cocking his head in reply, the gesture meant to gently prompt her to continue, implying he's interested in further elaboration of the somber remark. “I find it flattering that you're willing to trade in your anonymity on my behalf,” she coolly explains. “I hope it's worth it.”

Will catches Hannibal out of his periphery as he sets aside his drawings and folds his hands neatly in his lap, attentively watching their captive with a calm, enigmatic smile.

“You will awaken the sleeping bear,” Bedelia points out to him. Hannibal smiles placidly at the warning.

“We both know he always sleeps with one eye open,” he reminds her.

“The FBI may have closed your files and Jack may not be able to dredge a net through the *entire* ocean, but once he realizes just how thoroughly I've fallen off their radar, it will dredge up a very *specific* question, a question that will inevitably serve as your resurrection.”

Contemplating her point, Will studies Hannibal with equal curiosity, wondering himself what his companion's response will be.

Hannibal stares back at Bedelia with cold, condescending bemusement. “Do you truly imagine I would be so remiss in my considerations?”

“It isn't difficult to believe your arrogance has reached those startling heights. I've bore witness to your self-ruin before,” she retorts pointedly. Will feels his eyebrows raise, puzzled by what she's referring to. “You have an impressive capacity for averting the spotlight, but your colossally inflated ego denies you the patience to remain put. It begs the question, Hannibal, how much do you despise your comfort that you risk it so easily for such pettiness?”

Hannibal chuckles softly. “Oh, my dear. My poor *Mrs. Fell*, what does it say of your own vanity that you've so *'deceived'* yourself into believing I had any intention of spending out the rest of my days with you in our little Venetian *'nido d'amour'*?” he asks. “Did you truly think I was being careless? Did you think the attention I was attracting was unwanted?”

Hannibal smooths a hand back over his hair. “I'm sorry to say, I'm unconvinced. Your savvy has kept you alive and allowed you to successfully manipulate the public's sympathy— a respectable feat. And you're right, the capture-bond is a persuasive force, and you think you can win mercy by pity, but you disgrace yourself to insult me— your feeble attempt to convince me that you believe yourself fallen victim to the very illusion you've personally manufactured mocks not only my intelligence but the respect I have always had for yours. I will... perhaps give you the benefit of the doubt, as your judgment is currently impaired.”

“Aren't you the picture of *generosity*,” Bedelia hisses, her pale face paling even further as Hannibal gracefully stands from his chair.

“You entertain this notion that your cunning has no rival, a misapprehension I've indulged because it's served to my benefit,” he explains, leisurely strolling over to her with a predatory grin. “When one is convinced they have the upper-hand, they underestimate their opponent-- their confidence becomes a sort of sickness-- a blindness. This is the knight's foil. His enemy feints, the knight buys into it-- convinced his next strike will be his victory, instead, as he steps forward to attack-- he pierces himself on his enemy's ready blade.”

“You've led me to my own suicide,” Bedelia concludes, sneering at Hannibal as he plucks a stray curl away from her face, toying with it gently before tucking it back behind her ear.

“And you've graciously permitted me to,” he replies.

Will awaits the next move with bated breath.

“In Western culture, suicide is generally frowned upon; St. Peter does not let the soul past his gates. However, in circumstances such as these, in Eastern tradition, seppuku is accepted as honorable. I would allow you this honor.”

“You would assist me?” Bedelia asks uncertainly as Hannibal removes the ornamental wakizashi from above her mantel.

Hannibal unsheaths the short sword and runs a finger down the edge, testing the blade's sharpness. “Of course, in your case, your harakiri will be a symbolic one,” he explains

slipping the wakizashi back into it's sheath before replacing it on the wall.

Bedelia looks at him quizzically before she understands. “Ah,” She sighs. “You wish to avoid the mess.”

“It would be unfitting to despoil you in such a manner. Your aesthetic is too clean for such an untidy end,” he agrees, retrieving a small syringe from a case on the coffee table. He taps the needle once, and returns before his victim. “Please open your mouth.”

Bedelia stares at him, uncomprehending.

“The more you behave, the less painful and less messy this will be,” he promises.

Reluctantly she obeys, opening her mouth.

Will watches as Hannibal grips her chin gently. “Now stick out your tongue and say 'ahh',” he instructs.

With quick precision, he sticks the needle in her tongue, injecting an anesthetic.

Bedelia winces a little, recoiling in her seat as much as she's able. “Wha' 'ah you -oing?” She demands, her speech impaired by the instant numbness in her mouth. “Wha- is this?”

“A topical anesthetic,” he explains, returning to her with a small scalpel. Will's eyes are glued to the two of them as Hannibal leans back down, gripping her chin more firmly this time to hold her head in place as he clamps her tongue, holding it steady with his tongs before making a long incision, slicing it down the center. Bedelia gurgles loudly in protest, her tied down hands clawing at the arms of her wheelchair.

When he's finished, Bedelia sits, gagging and sobbing as he forces her head down so she won't choke on her own blood, holding a towel beneath her chin to collect the mess. When the blood flow lets up, he removes the clamp and lays a fresh towel over her chest. He finishes cleaning her up before he cleans the surgical instruments, replacing them back in their case with care.

“I've decided, that to create the effect we hope to seek, we will have to amputate the rest of your limbs,” he tells her plainly.

Bedelia moans pitifully, shaking her head.

“However, this operation shall be performed post-mortem if you wish, my dear.”

“-*ease!*” She begs.

Hannibal acknowledges her request benevolently, untying one of her arms. Instantly, her freed hand flies up to her face to feel the damage done to her tongue but Hannibal, quicker, grabs her wrist tightly and guides it back to her lap. Turning her hand palm up, he places the control for the morphine drip.

“I give you dignity in your death, Bedelia, by allowing you to take it for yourself,” he whispers to her softly. “I will ensure I depict you as truthfully as you have exhibited yourself in this life.”

Bedelia quakes, weeping and exhausted as she gazes down at the means to her end. Finally she looks back up at Hannibal, her expression surrendering and grateful. “-ank you,” she returns feebly before pushing the toggle to it's maximum setting.

Will feels a stir of jealousy clench tightly in his stomach watching his companion caress Bedelia's cheek as her eyes close, gasping as he sees him lean down, tenderly pressing his lips to hers upon her last exhalation, sending her off with a sweet, final kiss. “*Goodnight, Mrs. Fell*,” Hannibal whispers.

"We have work to do," he tells Will, glancing out the window at the first dusting fall of snow.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> Yay, fastest update I've ever done! Less than 24 hours between chapters, that's a new record for me! Happy Holidays and thanks for all your patience!

They arrive at the seediest motel they can find in time to catch the national news play their latest story of the Great Saw-scaled Viper revealed at Kennebunk's annual Ice show. They replay the footage filmed for the small town's local news, the guests crowding around as they unveil the sculpture.

It's perfect. The event's presenter reads the card in her hand with a wide smile, announcing to the crowd that the artist and donor is an anonymous, first-time participant and that any prize awarded may by donated back to the sponsor's charity. The camera pans from her to the submission as she pulls off the tarp, zooming in on the the scales, painstakingly carved into the skin of the giant, coiled snake.

Will marvels at the detail of it's reared head, mouth frozen in an open hiss. The exquisitely captured rendering of the teeth and the eyes took Hannibal ages, but the effort undertaken was worth every second for the end effect. The expressions on the faces of the crowd turn from awe to horror as they peer up at the impressive work, realizing what's been encapsulated inside.

The report goes onto explain that the mutilated victim had been identified as the missing psychiatrist, Bedelia Du Maurier: famed for her affiliation with the late Chesapeake Ripper and the FBI is currently offering a reward for any information that can be provided in connection to her murder.

The story replays a recording of a harried, sunken-faced Jack Crawford, taken from late October, when he'd been flooded by a torrent of questions by a harassing mob of reporters about the Great Red Dragon's recently reported death. “I'm unwilling to comment at this time,” he grumbles, deferring his official statement to another agent. Will feels a twinge of contrition as he watches him dodge away from the rushing onslaught of cameramen. He slams shut the door to his escort vehicle and the police clear the ensemble of news vans and gawkers from the road, making way for his exit. The focus returns to Jack's appointed representative.

“-From what we've speculated from the DNA evidence we've examined, Dolarhyde attacked the escaped fugitive Hannibal Lecter and received multiple fatal wounds-”

Will smirks. 'Escaped Fugitive' certainly sounds better than 'Purposefully Released Felon'.

“-And was pronounced already dead at the scene when we arrived.”

“-And is there any information with regard to Hannibal Lecter?”

“-At this time, he is presumed dead.”

The report flips back over to the current events, where the same agent is being interviewed. Will can see Jack glowering in the background, barking orders at his officers.

“-Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier was reported to have been Doctor Hannibal Lecter's former psychiatrist. She retired from practice after an incident following the death of one of her patients by self-afflicted asphyxiation, however, Doctor Du Maurier claimed to still serve in private, at the behest of Lecter.”

Hannibal returns to the room carrying several bags of groceries in from the car. “Bedelia would have abhorred the airing of her dirty laundry,” he remarks with a wry grin.

“Excuse you, I'm trying to hear this,” Will snaps, hushing him.

Hannibal sighs wearily at him as he turns away to draw shut the curtains, turning on a small bed-side lamp before putting away their purchases as Will fixes his gaze intently on the program.

“-Over three and a half years ago, Hannibal Lecter was declared a missing persons and put on the international most-wanted list when he escaped authorities after his murder of Abigail Hobbs and attempted murder of three others. Abigail Hobbs was the daughter of the late Garrett Jacob Hobbs, better known as the Minnesota Shrike, the posthumously convicted murderer and cannibal.”

“Oh, nice. Thanks,” Will says after Hannibal tosses him a bag of several new sets of socks. Tearing open the package, he puts on a fresh pair immediately. “Hey, while you're over there, can you crank up the heat? It's a fucking freezer in here.”

“-Included among the three individual's surviving the attack was Federal Agent, Jack Crawford, who lead the investigation against not only the Minnesota Shrike, but the Chesapeake Ripper as well as the late Red Dragon.”

“-After Lecter's disappearance, it was soon discovered, Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier, Lecter's former psychiatrist, whom was not involved in the incident of that evening, was also found missing from her home,” the reporter continues.

“-Six months later, Du Maurier was discovered living in Florence, Italy under the alias, 'Lydia Fell', wife to 'Roman Fell', the pseudonym Hannibal Lecter assumed while employed as a museum curator. After his murder of Italian detective Rinaldo Pazzi, he escaped authorities once again, however, Du Maurier was remanded into custody. Found with psychotropic hallucinogens in her system, Du Maurier claimed to have been abducted and subject to repeated drugging, threats and manipulation by Lecter.”

“-Initially charged as an accessory to two murders and acquitted of both, she was temporarily admitted into a rehabilitation facility where upon release, three months later, she was entered into Witness Protection, where she remained up until her most recent disappearance and subsequent death.”

Will watches Jack instruct one of his agents before sending him up to join the reporter.

“-Here, we have Agent Parks with the FBI, willing to offer a statement on behalf of FBI's current investigation into the murder of Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier,” she introduces. The agent nods a little uncertainly as he stares back at the camera like a deer caught in the headlights. “Is it possible Dr. Du Maurier had made any other enemies than renowned serial-murderer and cannibal Hannibal Lecter?” The reporter inquires.

“-We can't rule out anything at this point in time, however, as of now, we are uncertain of the motive,” the agent claims, on unsure footing.

“-Recent reports have come out revealing that Jack Crawford, Agent-in-Charge of the Behavioral Science Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Quantico, Virginia, whom lead the investigation against both Lecter and Dolarhyde, will be facing indictment for mishandling his latest case. How is the Bureau addressing these rumors?”

“-Uh...there is a lot of scrutiny, and our agents are always aware of the precarious nature of the public's opinion-” the agent rambles, skirting around the question.

“-Recent claims have been made implicating Crawford in Hannibal Lecter's release-- an accusation which also implicates Crawford in not only Dolarhyde's death, but that of Quantico Instructor of Criminal Psychology and FBI consultant, Will Graham-”

“-As of our recent meeting with our Head Offices in D.C. I am currently unable to provide further detail on that subject,” the agent responds uncomfortably. “That is all I can tell you at this time.”

“-Thank you, Agent Parks,” the reporter says before turning back to the camera. “ A recent lawsuit has been filed by the State of Maryland against the Baltimore division of the FBI. The claim states illegal procedures were undertaken in an attempt to capture the now late serial-killer, Francis Dolarhyde- whose death has been attached as a tenth conviction for the now potentially presumed missing Hannibal Lecter.”

“If they keep stacking them up like this, we'll need to grow more fingers to count 'em on,” Will scoffs.

“Well, we do always have our toes,” Hannibal replies, taking a seat on the bed beside him. The springs creak, groaning under the added weight.

“That's gonna be a racket,” Will grumbles.

“The neighbors will get used to it,” Hannibal remarks with a sly little smirk Will catches out of the corner of his eye.

Feeling himself blush, he redirects their attention back to the television. “Hey, look, it's Chilton's book.”

“-They call him, 'Hannibal-the-Cannibal'. The name first coined by the acclaimed psychiatrist and now best selling author Frederick Chilton, in his recently released, New-York Time's best selling autobiography-”

“God save us,” Hannibal mutters.

“You made the poor bastard a celebrity,” Will smirks. “Well, really, he's more of a rich bastard now.”

“'*Acclaimed psychiatrist*'? According to which medical journals?” Hannibal demands, squinting at the screen. “Who is doing their research?”

“-In his latest interview with Times magazine, Frederick Chilton tells us of his frightening encounter with Francis Dolarhyde. -*'my tongue was torn from my mouth by the Dragon's own teeth. I shuddered in agony and terror, forced to watch my captor's naked revelry, his chin dripping and pectoral's glistening with my blood'*-”

“That's a surprisingly graphic excerpt.”

"He almost sounds like he kinda *liked* it," Will laughs, "'*Chin dripping... glistening pectorals'*. That sounds almost kind of hot."

Hannibal huffs. "Taken out of context, it sounds like poorly written erotica."

"Only, considering his current state, the whole thing was probably transcribed for him."

"Makes one pity the unfortunate soul he hired to type it. I find it disturbing that it's selling so well. I find what that says about humanity to be incredibly disheartening."

“Oh, they eat it up. It's impressive you've lasted so long in your insular world of Mozart and Dostoyevski when the rest of the planet is tuning in to Maury and Fox News. Media's all in it for the money. The more sensational-- the higher the viewership,” Will berates. “I bet they're salivating for the chance to stick Chilton's ugly mug on the air-- that'll really get 'em raking in the bucks from the sponsors.”

Hannibal heaves a long sigh. “They say any publicity is good publicity.”

“Frederick is becoming the new *Freddy*,” Will points out.

“I'd almost forgotten she was still alive,” Hannibal grimaces. “More to the point, *why* is she still alive?”

“She's been *killing* it in the tabloids,” Will tells him, leaning over to grab one of the grocery bags. Fishing into it, he finds what he's looking for, pulls it out and tosses it over to his companion. “Look, it's you!”

Hannibal stares at the picture of him blown up on the front of the magazine.

“Hey, the shot's a good angle for you,” he remarks. “And check out the headline.”

“'*Hannibal the Cannibal Eats Ice-Queen'*,” Hannibal reads.

“The content is her usual bullshit, but you get an idea she almost wants to make friends. Elevates you to almost heroic status for ganking the lizard and prattles on for decades about Bedelia murdering her own patient. Brown-noser is convinced you're still alive and she's doing her damndest to save her ass from your wrath.”

“The only way Freddie can truly hope to redeem herself is in a three course entree.”

“You can't eat everybody.”

“I can try.”

“Well, at least she'd taste better than Chilton's sorry, charred hide,” Will snorts. “I hope he invests in some good plastic-surgery before they start pasting pictures of him up everywhere.”

“Something we should probably consider if we ever want to step foot again out of this...”

“*Dump*?” Will offers.

“I was going to say hovel, but I suppose that works just as well,” Hannibal sighs plucking at the tear in the worn bedspread. “I can hardly tell between the gauche-floral print and the stains.”

“Instead of plastic-surgery, we could grow out our hair and our beards and hide up in the Yukon pretending to be yeti.”

“The Canadian border is tighter than you think it is.”

“Where there is a *Will*, there is a way,” Will snorts.

Hannibal gives him a sidelong glance. “That was the most painful pun I've ever heard.”

Will grins lazily back at him.

“You think you're charming.”

“You think I'm charming,” Will snorts, kicking his socked foot into Hannibal's shin.

He returns with a long-suffering sigh. “I've been told my taste may be a little questionable at times,” he mutters, leaning back against the headboard, giving in and joining Will in his relaxed sprawl.

“-According to Doctor Chilton's perspective from his most recent statement to the Maryland State Board, the FBI failed to provide adequate protection-”

“Okay, now they're just stuck on Chilton,” Will huffs, grabbing the remote. “I'm going to switch over to a different network.”

“-Containing the body of the missing psychiatrist-”

“Here we go,” he grins. “Back to the meat.”

“Shame so much of it had to go to waste-”

“Better than to your waist,” Will shrugs.

“Should I be offended by your insinuation?”

Will raises an exasperated eyebrow, sparing him a short, once-over glance. “Don't get your knickers in a twist. I still think you're hot stuff.”

Hannibal's rejoining look is heavy with scorn. “Your recent bout of day-drinking is sinking your wit.”

Will sighs, tossing his bottle of whiskey over to his companion. “*Don't hate me 'cause you ain't me*.”

Unscrewing the cap, Hannibal takes a hearty pull.

Will is a little impressed. “If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?”

“Something to that degree,” he agrees reluctantly.

“It's all practice for when we're lumber-jacks,” Will drawls. “All I was saying was, don't get too comfortable here. They're saying your name an awful lot suddenly, and you gotta be fit if you're gonna outrun them.”

“Her limbs would have been lean proteins,” Hannibal defends, sulking a little.

“Rampant hedonism can wind up leading to complacency. And then you get fat.”

“Rampant know-it-all's can wind up becoming foie-gras. And that's *decadently* fattening.”

Will shushes him. “Look, they're showing it again.”

“You did an admirable job on the scaling on the tail.”

“Tell my cold, dead, arthritic fingers about it.”

“-Famed for her connection to the Chesapeake Ripper case,” the news anchor says, spinning away from his co-anchors to look at the camera. “The sculpture Du Maurier was discovered frozen inside was claimed to be an anonymous donation-”

Hannibal takes Will's closest hand resting between them on the bed and lifts it to his mouth, pressing his lips to his knuckles before tucking his fingers between his palms and rubbing

them together. When he releases his hand, Will tests his grip and grins shyly down down at their feet at the end of the bed, nearly touching and feeling borderline tipsy, dares himself to twist around to give Hannibal his other hand for the same treatment. “Can't forget this one,” he reminds him attempting to sound casual.

After a moment of silence, Will darts up a quick glance, cringing slightly at Hannibal's open expression of amusement. *Caught.*

“*What*?” He demands, cringing even harder at how self-conscious the tone of his question comes off as.

“Nothing,” Hannibal replies, taking Will's other hand. He repeats the soothing massage for a few seconds in silence under Will's tense surveillance and finally, his lips curl up in a small smirk, unable to help himself and Will yanks back his hand with a short, embarrassed, angry little huff.

“It's better, *thanks*.”

Hannibal doesn't say anything in return, but Will notices his infuriatingly smug expression still lingering on his face afterward.

“-Back in early October, the Chesapeake Ripper, once renowned psychiatrist and socialite of Baltimore's elite inner-circles, Hannibal Lecter, charged with nine-murders and suspected with over a dozen more was presumed dead by the FBI, suspending further cases. Since his conviction, three years ago, Lecter had been reportedly held in containment at a court-ordered privately owned facility under FBI sanctioned jurisdiction. The licensed owner and supervising director, psychiatrist Alana Verger, also, formerly a Bureau contracted criminal profiler as well as one of Lecter's few, surviving victims, has been reported to be witnessed, flanked by an escort of personally-employed body-guards fleeing her home in Baltimore, Maryland alongside her wife, Margot Verger, heiress and Executive CEO of Verger Enterprises with their young son.”

“-We are here live with reporter Anne Meyers and Officer Yang.”

“-Officer Yang,” the reporter asks, “Last night, there were no signs of any suspicious activity reported?”

“That would be accurate, ma'am,” the officer replies. “Though you usually get, typically I mean, in a commotion like this, a lot of paranoia.”

“-Thank you, Officer Yang. We now have with us Agent Howard, here to speak on official behalf of the Augusta, Maine division of the FBI.”

A young woman, Will thinks he recognizes steps up to the reporter.

“-After a brief conference with the Baltimore office, we can assure you, that everything is being done to find the culprit or culprits,” she declares confidently.

“-Are there any suspects?”

“-Not at this time.”

“-Is there any suspicion that Hannibal Lecter is still alive?”

“-Again, at this time, that information is pending further investigation.”

“-Many today have been drawing parallels between the ice-sculpture display of Du Maurier and the exhibition of the Chesapeake Ripper's former victims, does the FBI give any credence to those rumors?”

Agent Howard, just as Agent Parks appears ill-prepared to respond to the inquiry. “We've yet to identify any trace of evidence that would lead us to suspect Lecter is the culprit. As of now, he is still presumed dead.”

“If I keep hearing that I'm dead I'm going to start believing it,” Hannibal chuckles.

“Maybe we're ghosts, and this is the after-life,” Will suggests stealing back the bottle of whiskey.

“That's a morbid thought,” Hannibal replies glancing around them at the dingy room. “If there is a hell, then we are certainly in it, and I do hope it's not too late to repent.”

“-There have been some suggestions that Will Graham is still alive and either under Witness Protection or hiding out somewhere as Hannibal Lecter's accomplice, can we give any stock to that idea, Agent Howard?”

“-As of now, both Lecter's and Graham's files remain closed. There is no evidence to support either are still alive. Both men were gravely injured, there was significant loss of blood from both individuals found at the crime scene-- and there was enough forensic analysis to infer they both fell over the cliff into the Atlantic. Even if they could have survived the fall, the odds were against them making it back to the shore without drowning,” the agent explains.

“-But neither body has yet been found.” the reporter points out.

“-That's true, but the Atlantic is a pretty large body of water, and the time of night they fell meant the tide would have rolled them back out to sea before we had a chance to search the surrounding shores,” the agent clips back.

“I'm a strong swimmer,” Hannibal shrugs.

“So I've noticed. You almost ripped my arm out of it's socket.”

“It was like that when I pulled you back up,” Hannibal defends. “You should really thank me, in my opinion. I didn't have to save your life after that foolish stunt you pulled.”

Will shifts himself off the bed, climbing to his feet. “I don't want to talk about it,” he snaps sharply.

“I'm sorry I mentioned it,” Hannibal says with a contrite frown. “Come back. You know I don't bear any grudge against you, Will.”

“No, it's fine. I gotta take a piss. I'll be right back.”

Will closes himself in the tiny bathroom and leans against the closed door, breathing heavily. He doesn't know why Hannibal doesn't begrudge him for his betrayal, but he can't bring himself to ask, and even the mention of it makes something inside him squirm with discomfort. A messy rush of emotional turmoil heightened by the alcohol swimming through his veins makes him wince back several sloppy, unbidden tears. He wipes his face confused by what he's feeling and feeling stupid for even crying.

Heaving a heavy, shaky sigh, Will gathers himself and goes to take the long-needed piss he came here for in the first place. After flushing the toilet, he spends a long minute washing his hands and then his face, splashing cool water against his eyes to lessen the tell-tale redness.

He can tell when he finally returns to the bedroom that his little trip took too long by the slightly concerned crease between Hannibal's eyes as he looks up at him.

“-According to popular belief, Hannibal Lecter was purportedly obsessed with Will Graham, and there have been significant hints that Graham was considered 'unstable', which was why he was never in permanent employ with the FBI, is that correct?”

Great moment to come back in for, Will thinks, gritting his teeth.

Hannibal pats the bed beside him, averting his eyes back to the screen. Will is eternally grateful for the way Hannibal always knows when he can no longer stand being looked at.

“-With all due respect, Ms. Meyers, you need to check your facts again. Mister Graham was under state-employ, even as a consultant.”

“That's technically true if you consider that I was under contract with Quantico,” Will points out, returning to his original spot, still slightly warm from when he left it. He shivers anyway and Hannibal sits up to reach down to gather their spare blanket that had formerly served to prop up his feet. He unfolds it, wafting it out in the air with a single, quick flip of his hands before laying it over Will's lap.

“Thank you, *mom*,” Will says with a small sniffle, laughing softly at them both.

Hannibal nods, smiling at him tenderly for a brief moment before returning his attention to the television.

“-I'm sorry, Agent Howard, but can you shed any light on whether or not you believe it's possible, that if Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter were alive they might be hiding out together? Could either have had the motive or the opportunity to kidnap and murder Dr. Du Maurier?”

“-At this time, it is the official position of the FBI that both individuals in question are presumed dead,” the agent repeats, her tone as tense as the muscles in her face. She's tired of repeating herself. “In any hypothetical instance of their survival, I will tell you this, there was never any precedent to suggest Mr. Graham would have allied himself with Lecter. I was never acquainted with Lecter, and I didn't know Mr. Graham personally, but I was his student

for several semesters when I attended school in Quantico, and in my opinion, the reason he was so good at his job was not because he some 'wolf in sheep's clothing', but because he was driven by justice-- to do good. He was a good man."

"It looks like you have a fan," Hannibal muses. "Did you know her?"

"Possibly. I've taught a lot of students, and they're kind of a blur, you know?" Will pauses for a moment before looking back at his companion. He feels the start of small grin pulling at the sides of his face. "Christ. Well I'll be *damned*. Are you actually jealous?"

"-There are multiple reports that both Lecter and Graham attempted on multiple occasions to murder each other."

"That could still happen, Will," Hannibal suggests with an easy grin.

"-I don't speak ill of the dead, Ms. Meyers, but let me tell you that while I can't speak on behalf of Lecter's motivations, I can tell you there were never any charges filed against Graham to support that claim. I assume he wanted Hannibal captured, not dead. Graham was not a violent individual."

Will feels Hannibal staring at him and shifts uncomfortably.

"It appears she doesn't know you that well."

"-And yet, isn't it true that Will Graham was responsible for the deaths of both Garret Jacob Hobbs as well as Randall Tier?"

"-Both are a matter of public record, and if you look at both, you will see he was never charged in either case."

"-So what we are currently looking at with regard to the death of Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier is a potential copy-cat killer?"

"-We can't rule out any possibility at this point," Agent Howard replies.

"She reminds me of Miriam Lass. Very bright young woman," Hannibal decides. "Though this one's a bit too much of a stickler for the written facts. Yet, I suspect that may be due to her partiality... her infatuation for her teacher, perhaps."

"I hear you've personally witnessed that phenomena for yourself," Will retorts, grabbing the remote to flip through the stations, sick of the repetitious gossip about himself and Hannibal and everyone they've ever known, loved and possibly killed.

"We don't have a lot of channels," he reports after a minute of surfing. "Pay-per-view, porn, infomercials, '80's sitcom reruns, and oh look, more porn. Surprise, surprise."

When Hannibal is still quiet, Will flips off the television and tosses the remote on the nightstand. He stares up at the ceiling for a long stretching minute, feeling the eyes of his companion studying him before he finally gives up and looks back at him. "What now?"

“Nothing,” Hannibal, replies softly with a small, pleased and half-amused curl of his lips.

“Stop saying that. Seriously, what?”

“You're a hand-full, Will Graham. You require quite a lot of tending sometimes.”

“Yeah, I'm a *peach*,” Will grumbles back, “I know.”

“You need to relax,” Hannibal tells him. “You don't need to leap out of your skin every time something is said that makes you uncomfortable. Talk to me, or don't talk, but don't run away.”

“It's just--” Will sucks in a deep breath and huffs a sigh. “I'm a little edge, you know? I've never been a fugitive before-- or a possibly dead one for that matter. A dead one everyone still thinks is alive and on the lam with my... my apparently sworn enemy.”

Hannibal twists onto his side and leans an elbow on the mattress, propping his chin in his hand. He gazes up at Will with warmth and gentle curiosity. “If we're not 'sworn enemies', then are we friends or will 'the light from friendship still not reach us for a million years'?” he asks. The question is loaded, but it's tucked safely in an airy, half-amused tone that Will isn't quite sure he knows how to respond to immediately.

“I'm not sure what we are, but I don't think that we're 'friends', Hannibal,” Will finally replies, honestly and serious. “That doesn't quite... exactly cover it.”

Hannibal understands his meaning. He's not offended to be told they're not friends, but Will can't muster up the courage to voice that it's because they're more than that.

“I've longed to kiss you again, Will. I've *longed* for you,” Hannibal reveals to him with sudden, blunt honesty.

Will feels his heart clench and flutter in his chest with nervous anticipation. “I-- I want that too,” he confesses in a whisper, but his apprehension gets the better of him.

“If it isn't already transparently clear to you, I want to be your lover. I want us to be lovers and I don't think I'm mistaken in imagining I'm the only one of us who wants that. Am I? Do you want that too?”

Will's face grows hot, feeling a tingling in the pit of his stomach and a tightness stirring in his groin. “Yeah,” he replies almost breathlessly. “Yeah, I want that too.”

“I want you to be mine-- but I won't make the first move, Will. You've got to overcome whatever makes you jump to the ceiling whenever I touch you.”

Will laughs with self-deprecation, running a hand over his flushed cheeks. “Um. I think that the cause of that might be the actual... pretty much unexplored sexual tension.”

Hannibal grins, fondness and amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. “I've considered that.”

“I'm not some... fucking, *blushing virgin* though, okay? Not some... delicate... *maiden* too timid for her first *deflowering*. I mean, you know, it's not that I... I haven't been with... you know, another *man*, or like I'm having some great, big... *'gay crisis'*, I honestly have no problem with any of that... *stuff*,” Will spits out half-laughing, half-shaking and half-mortified by the particularly embarrassing word-vomit that has just spilled out of his mouth.

To Hannibal's credit, he's not exactly staring at him judgmentally, but his expression does resemble that of an anthropologist finding a particularly interesting new kind of species.

Will heaves another sigh, biting at the inside of his cheek while trying to figure out how to use his words to logically explain the cacophony of emotions swirling around inside of him. “I feel like, there is just this ridiculous, overabundance of crazy shit that's happened between us, and we're both to blame for that, and so, I don't know, sometimes I think there's too much of it, we fucked up too many times and we missed a window somewhere along the line...”

“The window's wide open on my side of the room,” Hannibal shrugs.

Will smirks a little. “Well if it is, shut the damn thing because it's cold enough in here as it is.”

“I'll shut it if only if we're in the same room, Will.”

“We are in the same room,” Will whispers back with a meek, ironic grin.

“Well then, you don't have to be cold anymore,” Hannibal replies, reaching forward with his hand to caress Will's jaw. “We've both tried to kill each other enough times-- it's *par for the course*, and this last time, you only tried to kill me-- you didn't try to *leave* me. There is a difference. That difference makes *all the difference*.”

“Uh, okay,” Will replies, swallowing thickly.

“May I have some clarification on what that means?”

Will clears his throat. “Okay. As in, I think we're okay.”

“I assure you we're 'okay',” Hannibal sighs, smiling with a little exasperation. “You don't need to search me for reassurance. It's permanent. It'll stick, I promise.”

“You should know I think you're probably insane,” Will tells him leaning forward to rest his forehead against Hannibal's. “But it's okay because I think we might both be.”

“Well, then if you think I'm insane, it won't matter if I tell you I love you. And that I've been in love with you for a very long time.”

Will's eyes flutter close and he sucks in a deep breath. “Me too. I think I have been since I first met you.”

"Sentimental confessions aside, I would like to kiss you."

"I'm pretty sure you should do that," Will breathes, leaning forward.

At first, Hannibal's lips touch his own, grazing across his mouth softly, waiting for his to relax, to become soft and open; to accept him again. Will feels the last of his hesitation leave him and helplessly gives way, kissing him back fully. It becomes hungry fast, and Will collapses down almost bonelessly, grabbing onto Hannibal's shirt to pull him closer, wrapping his arms around his neck before rolling on top of him.

Hannibal nibbles his way down his neck, nosing against his throat, inhaling him like he's air and he can't get enough of him. The force of his desire is overpowering; intoxicating, and Will feels himself responsively writhing on top of him, pressed chest to chest, legs straddling his hips. The sensation of the physical connection in spirit with the mind and soul is exulting and when Hannibal finds the particularly sensitive spot just below his ear that elicits just the right sounding moan, he favors it obsessively, licking and biting until Will is writhing against him, groaning with unbridled lust.

When Hannibal finds his mouth again he devours it, and Will lowers his hips, needing to feel him. The hot hardness of his cock presses through his pants against Will's and for a moment, he's so light-headed the room almost spins before he finds his bearings and desperately grinds down against him, until finally Hannibal is moaning into his mouth, begging mindlessly, begging wordlessly for more of him.

He tugs at Wills shirt and Will knows he wants it gone. Quickly he whips it off, tossing it aside and goes to work on unbuttoning Hannibal's, but the other man, too impatient to care, reaches his hand between them and yanks it the rest of the way open, mumbling something incoherently about finding the damn things later to sew back on because they really don't have enough shirts with them for this kind of carelessness, and then Will is helping him out of the goddamned thing the rest of the way.

The belt buckles come next and Will decides he's never hated clothing more. Fumbling down his pants he shakes his foot to kick them the rest of the way off before yanking down Hannibal's but their mouths can barely part for long enough to finish the job, colliding back into each other with teeth and panting and need.

When they finally discard each other of their respective underwear, the tumble back down is ungraceful and makes the mattress springs squeal in protest but is met together with teasing, playful grins and soft laughter intermixed with the greediest kisses, and then, Will feels Hannibal's hands explore his body, and it's slower now, the way he does it is nearly worshiping and then Will realizes Hannibal is untangling himself-- pulling away to *look*, to follow the trail of his palms over Will's chest and Will's stomach and his hips and he realizes it's because it's the first time he's ever gotten to. The first time he's gotten to look and *touch*.

“You are so beautiful,” Hannibal whispers gazing down at him, and he's trembling. He's fucking *trembling* as if he's waited for an eternity for this moment, as if Will is the first and only thing he's ever seen and ever wanted to see. “I want to belong to you,” he confesses against Will's mouth. “I want to be yours. I want you inside of me and I want to be inside of you.”

The raw emotion, the honesty and the yearning in the deep shudder of his voice knock on the core of Will's soul and he allows him in, tugging him back down into the deepest kiss. When

he finally lets him back up, they're both almost out of breath. “I want that-- I want this,” Will gasps, “Everything. All of you.”

“*Us*,” Hannibal says, guiding him back down beneath him.

“*Us*,” Will repeats after him, reveling in the fitting way it sounds.

Hannibal whispers it again against his ear as he spits into his fist and slicks it down his cock.

“Us,” he says as he reaches down between them, tugging Will's cock against his own in the palm of his slippery hand. The delicious slide of himself against Hannibal is almost too much all at once, and he's panting and writhing beneath him, feeling the heat and the tightening start in the center of his belly and swell lower until it reaches his balls and he clenches, struggling, gasping for air.

And then, Hannibal's hand squeezes at the top, pressing together the heads of their cocks and Will feels himself tense at the same moment his lover goes still above him, and then suddenly, Hannibal rolls his hips forward and then he's shaking with a low, rippling groan.

“*Will-*”

The wanton, blissed-out way Hannibal speaks his name topples Will over the edge and the dense knot of pleasure releases from him all at once in an explosive wave that rocks them together. They spill at almost the same instant, their seed shooting between them coating each other's belly's and chests, and the feeling of the hotness and wetness is so satisfying against his skin, and the way Hannibal collapses on top of him afterward, and the way their cum makes them stick together-- which Will reasons should be kind of gross, but is actually kind of amazing and one of the best things he thinks he's ever felt.

Hannibal rolls off of him to let him catch his breath and Will swallows down the air in deep, quick bursts closing his eyes for a minute to slow the spinning of the room.

He's never made love like this before-- this sensually, this desperately or this *passionately*.

“*Will-*” Hannibal whispers, his soft voice overflown with even softer emotion. Will feels him find his hand and interlock their fingers before bringing it up to his mouth. His lips brush over the tops of his knuckles as he delivers a kiss to each finger tip and Will knows with absolute certainty down to his core he's adored; beloved. He's so saturated with the pure, intimidating intensity of the emotions pouring through him and pouring out of him, that when Hannibal wraps around him, encasing him in the warmth of his embrace, the feelings become for a moment too overwhelming to bear, and he realizes he's shaking.

And then Hannibal is rocking him against his chest. “*Hush, it's alright, release it. Let it back to me*,” he guides him.

Will does as he's told. Using Hannibal as his anchor, he pushes the overflow out of the ewer of his mind. It flows out as quickly as it had poured in until the balance is restored and he can breathe again.

“I don't usually need after-care,” Will sighs, exhausted and a little annoyed at himself.

“It's alright,” Hannibal replies and he feels his smile against his cheek. Will is relieved he means it. “It was my fault. I wanted you to feel it-- what I feel. I'll use a little more restraint in the future,” he promises.

“No. I don't want you to hold back and I don't want to buffer myself from you anymore,” Will argues, looking back at Hannibal meaningfully. “I wanted to. I wanted it. I didn't know what to expect-- how it would feel, and I wasn't prepared, but I am now.”

Hannibal combs his fingers through Will's hair, resting the palm of his hand on the back of his neck. “Then I will always show you exactly what you mean to me, Will, and I will remind you whenever you feel yourself begin to stray... and I will bring you back home to me each and every time.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The heat kicks on with a loud, metallic clink from the old motel radiator jarring Will awake with a sharp gasp.

Torn so abruptly from his sleep, for a second, heart racing, he remains frozen in place, blinking in confusion; his bearings adrift in a momentary limbo-- the fuzzy place where it's never immediately clear as to which world is the real one. *He was panicking, shouting about something-- something happened and he couldn't fix it--*

The process of grounding himself back to reality is thankfully expedited by the gentle exhalations of his companion sleeping soundly beside him. Turning over to look at him, Will sucks in a long, ragged breath of relief as he squints through the dark at Hannibal's silhouetted form, calming himself as he watches the even rise and fall of the other man's chest.

The last vestiges of his dream linger, clinging in the periphery of Will's memory: vivid fragments that spike out at him as the rest scatter away, escaping back to the unreachable depths of his subconscious.

Vague images of walking through the woods. It's winter and he can see his breath.

Pinching his eyes tightly back shut, he tries to recall what happened. He remembers feeling the snapping of frozen twigs and hearing the ice crunch beneath his boots as his dogs prance ahead of him down the trail.

For a second, he'd lost sight of them after they'd caught some scent and raced off from him to hunt it. He remembers the sharp sense of frustration he'd felt as he'd hollered after them-- when they'd ignored their command in pursuit of their chase-- the confusion he'd felt-- *he'd trained them better than to run off like this--*

Will locates them by following their excited yipping and jogs over to catch up. He finds the dogs crowding around something, eagerly whining and digging--

Clearing them out of the way, he see's what they've found. Leaning down to investigate, Will thinks at first it looks like a rabbit warren, but after a moment, he recognizes the hole has been newly dug out by shovel-- the tool is still there, left behind in the snow.

After clearing away the bramble of leaves and twigs, he removes his glove and reaches into the hole until he comes upon something warm and wet. Immediately, he recoils back, pulling out his hand. He cringes with disgust as he looks at the fresh blood glistening on his fingers, but something in his gut compels him to get over it-- he wants to know what it is-- he gets a feeling whatever's inside has been put there for him to find.

Crouching down again, he plants his knee on the icy ground and reaches back in to retrieve it. What he pulls back out is impossible. Bewildered, Will stares aghast at the bloody human heart, warm and beating, alive in his hand.

“It's yours,” Hannibal explains to him, having appeared out of the blue behind him.

Will gasps at his sudden, inexplicable presence.

“It's taken awhile for you to find me, Will,” he tells him. *“I've been waiting for a long time.”*

Will remembers turning to face him, holding out the heart. *“Where is this from?”* he'd demanded-- his voice coarse-- his own heart hammering like a parade of drums, beating hard and fast in his ears. He feels his other hand close tightly around the handle of his hunting knife-- he hadn't realized he was holding it before now and with dawning horror, he watches Hannibal unzip his jacket.

The other man's chest is bare beneath, and there it is, the gaping hole in the center. Will releases his knife and it falls to the ground. The new blood covering the blade glistens brightly against the snow.

“I carved it out of you-” Will utters in disbelief.

“I will never deny you anything you want.”

“I didn't want this,” Will chokes out miserably, *“I didn't mean to kill you.”*

Hannibal staggers toward him, stretching out one hand for Will while clutching the other over his wound. *“Journeys end in lover's meetings.”*

"What does that mean?" he demands.

"The meaning will be clear when you're awake."

Will sees him collapse and remembers feeling overwhelmed by his grief--

Reopening his eyes, he stares up at the ceiling through the dark and heaves a heavy sigh. Turning over onto his side, he reaches blindly for his glasses on the nightstand and squints at the clock. It's too ungodly an hour to stay awake but the memory of the dream has left him feeling too rattled for sleep.

Instead, he rolls out of bed and pads quietly to the bathroom to relieve his full bladder. After he's finished he returns into the sheets as carefully as possible but he can hear Hannibal's breathing has quieted. Sensing he's awake, Will doesn't lay back down as he'd originally intended, feeling as if he ought to provide an apology--

“Sorry if I woke you up,” he whispers softly. He knows he doesn't entirely mean it-- a part of him is longing for the company while the other part is desperate to avoid explaining why he needs it.

“You sound shaken,” Hannibal observes.

“Just had to take a piss,” he explains with a cursory shrug his companion probably can't see anyway.

“I know. I felt you get out of bed. I heard the flush.”

“You're a light sleeper,” Will snorts.

“Old habits.”

Will chuckles softly. “Okay. Goodnight then,” he says reluctantly.

Hannibal pauses for a stretch before returning the sentiment. “Goodnight, Will.”

Feeling uncomfortably awake and knowing Hannibal is yet to let himself fall back to sleep--*waiting on him*, Will relents.

“I had an... odd dream,” he explains with a small rush of irritation at himself for surrendering to his compulsion to explain himself further when he'd been given the perfect out.

“You wish to discuss it,” Hannibal prompts.

“Not really,” he lies.

Will feels the other man shift in the bed to sit up and hears the soft click of the nightstand lamp being turned on.

He cringes against the sudden light. “Is that really necessary?”

“You can conceal yourself in too many ways borrowing the dark to abet you,” Hannibal explains. “In the dark you can modulate your tone, you can use a lie to convince me, to pacify me. This way, I can see your face, I can read what you need from me whether you want me to or not.”

Will snorts. “I think they'd term that 'forced entry'.”

“You gave me the warrant yourself, Will.”

“Right. But that doesn't entitle you to abuse the privilege,” he retorts, squinting at Hannibal as his eyes adjust to the new brightness in the room.

Hannibal raises his palm up to Will in a calm, defensive gesture. “I am only attempting to address a concern you broached.”

“Regardless of your uh... good intentions, there are some parameters we're going to need to work out,” Will states, twisting a hand through his hair, feeling just as defensive. “There are certain measures of privacy that still should be, you know, respected.”

“Then I take that to mean you are no longer interested in telling me about this 'odd' dream you experienced?”

“No, I mean, obviously there's some reticence, but, I don't exactly appreciate your approach to fishing it out of me-”

“Which you've made considerably transparent, Will. You never were an easy patient.”

Will snorts. “I'll hand you that much,” he admits. “But can you blame me? You have always been rather consistently... *insistent* about climbing your way into my head. You and a good handful of others.”

Hannibal smiles; infinitely patient. “You build high walls.”

“Given you the ladder though, haven't I,” Will points out.

“I am not your doctor, Will. If I ever was, even unofficially, I am no longer, but I do still have a vested interest in your welfare. Perhaps more of one now than I would were I still,” Hannibal replies coolly. “To satisfy my point, we could reexamine last night, but I doubt that it need come to that. To further defend myself, although there was a certain *haste* in my endeavor to assist you, I would draw your attention to the unreasonably early hour and beg you for a small modicum of leniency.”

Will laughs softly. “Leniency granted.”

“It occurs to me that you retreated out of reflex,” Hannibal notes.

“You're right. It's just, being an open book is going to take some getting used to. Particularly with you. Feels a little dangerous, showing you all the cards.”

“You think I would play them against you?”

Will considers this. “Not really,” he replies honestly, but nothing is ever certain. Winds can change, and wherever they blow, the sails have a way of forcing the ship in that direction.

“Do you still entertain any lingering doubts?”

Will sighs and stares at his fingers worrying at the wrinkles in the sheets. He never knows exactly what to do with his hands when his feelings conflict with his more rational instincts.

“Not unless you do,” Will replies uncertainly.

“You still fantasize about killing me,” Hannibal surmises.

Will flinches. “Not intentionally.”

“But the desire has followed you into your dreams.”

“I wouldn't call it a 'desire',” he corrects. “But you know, *'old habits'*...”

“How did you do it?”

“I took your heart.”

The corners of Hannibal's mouth curl up at the corners. “There is some irony there,” he notes, amused.

“I know. Not particularly inventive and the symbolism is terribly cliched,” Will agrees with a small, self-deprecating grin.

“Our dreams can often be a reflection of our subconscious desires,” Hannibal muses. “Our repressed thoughts and urges that we often find too distasteful to give too much credit to during those hours we're awake can swell to the surface when we sleep.”

“Even in my dream, I wasn't particularly *thrilled*, Hannibal. The prospect of your death isn't exactly pleasurable to contemplate. Not anymore, anyway.”

“I was always of the opinion to be flattered,” Hannibal admits. “There is a special intimacy to murdering a loved one.”

“Trust me when I tell you, I did not love you then,” Will laughs darkly. “Whatever the opposite of love was, that's exactly how I felt.”

“Love and hate stem from similar places of origin. In an MRI, you can see the same circuits light up the same parts of the brain for both emotions. It's a fascinating coincidence.”

“But you can't say they're the same thing. There's a conflict of interest,” Will argues. “If I love you, wouldn't killing you be... I don't know, somewhat *antithetical*?”

“Depends on whether or not you have a reason to.”

“I have a long and detailed list of reasons to. I could write volumes of heavy tomes on the subject,” Will laughs. “If not for me, then at least on behalf of the greater majority of humankind.”

Hannibal studies him quietly. “Have you so thoroughly forsaken your ties to that brotherhood that the idea now seems repugnant?”

“Officially. Humanity deserves you,” Will exclaims. “Come to think of it, it deserves us both. Our species is a blight.”

“That is an extremely critical viewpoint.”

“There are exceptions. There are always exceptions. Quite a few, in fact. But I know I'm not among them. Nor are you, for that matter.”

“You have a bleak outlook,” Hannibal decides. “I think mine happens to be more charitable.”

“Perhaps. I'm not saying slaughter the horde-- I don't think we have any right to be judge, jury or executioner, but as a peer, I'm accepting of our eventual, inevitable extinction. I feel only resentment to be affiliated in any way with a cumulative species that can't evolve fast enough to keep up with our own self-destruction, but then, you know, I have always been kind of the black sheep.”

Hannibal nods. “Although, you've never been quite able to reconcile yourself with that idea.”

“I wanted to fit in with the flock, I just never knew where I fit, and the other sheep kind of figured that out before I did.”

Hannibal looks at him speculatively. “Some of us are never meant to 'fit in with the flock'.”

“You look at that like it's a good thing. You're proud of it-- that you're something so... atypical.”

“You word that as a criticism.”

Will shakes his head, “No. No, it's an observation. Purely objective,” he grins. “It's not an accusation.”

“While that may be so now, awhile ago, it wouldn't have been. Your mind has changed.”

“To accommodate a more recently introduced 'vista' of the world. You said yourself that I would adapt to my experiences-- that I couldn't run away from them, and I suppose what you said was right. Anyway, just for the record, you're deflecting.”

“I have never, from pure spite or disdain, been so removed as to deny counting myself as a member of my own species,” Hannibal defends.

“You'd want to if you'd been rejected by said species as often as I have.”

“I accept you,” Hannibal argues.

“Your acceptance is biased. As is all of your judgment,” Will counters. “You are subjective every time you select a person to dehumanize. Or elevate. To don the mantle of the judge is the embodiment of arrogance.”

“There exists a widely accepted spectrum of acceptable behaviors one may exhibit to be acceptable to the rest of society. My expectations reflect that.”

“Then, by that logic, I should have been on your dinner table eons ago.”

“You often nearly have been,” Hannibal smirks. “But you're incredibly elusive.”

“Strange. We don't often sleep with what we eat,” Will points out.

“Exceptions can be made. I'm not inflexible,” Hannibal retorts. “This is far from the first time you've slung the word 'arrogant' in my direction-”

“If the shoe fits,” Will interjects with a lofty grin.

“There are time I have stepped back from humanity and become it's observer. Studying something one is a part of is no new phenomenon.”

There is a tone of defensiveness Will can't help but latch onto. “God studies his creation, and then he smites it. Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Again we return to the God comparisons,” Hannibal grins. “I'm inclined to be flattered.”

“We take what we can get,” Will offers.

“All this from the misanthrope.”

“And you're not? Elitism is a type of misanthropy.”

“Observation has led to a certain familiarity with the condition.”

“Familiarity breeds contempt.”

“And contempt can breed an illusion of arrogance.”

“But it's not an illusion,” Will sighs, leaning against the headboard. “There is no such thing as a fair appraisal. There are too many considerations... and, in your case, too many exceptions. I don't know whether it'd denial or delusion, but at the core of it, you're just making excuses to defend your superiority complex. You only object to the classification because you've designated it into your portmanteau of punishable sins and you'd hate to think of yourself as a hypocrite.”

“I would applaud your assessment if it had any merit,” Hannibal retorts, nonplussed.

“Your defense is without merit. You're a sophist.”

Hannibal stares at him with a small frown. “I find that remark incredibly offensive.”

“You can lie to me and you can lie to everybody else, but you can't lie to yourself. You know what you are and you enjoy it. It gives you a damn good reason to do exactly as you please without fear of reprisal from your conscience.”

Hannibal considers this. “I always respect having a reason.”

“The wolf is nature's way of culling the herd,” Will suggests off-handedly.

“Overpopulation can be detrimental to the land.”

Will snorts. “So now you're an environmentalist.”

“That's a distant but not inaccurate distillation,” Hannibal concedes.

“You're aware that's been disproven though, right? I mean we've got a really toxic relationship with our little rock in the sky, but the um... the experts are pretty much certain that if we got off our collective asses we could probably get the place to sustain our entire population... with leftovers.”

“Some parasites are more of a pestilence than others though. As a misanthrope, this would be your perspective. Should they share in the wealth?”

“First of all, I'm not really a misanthrope, I'm just disappointed. There is a difference. Second of all and more importantly, it doesn't matter what I think, your judgment is your own. Either way, I've heard far worse excuses for murder.”

Hannibal smirks. “What's yours, nihilism?” he asks, playfully tugging a little on Will's side of the sheets.

“Aptly,” he replies, grinning smugly.

“I wouldn't have taken you for the type to clutch to a cliché.”

“If I did, it would be with a sense of irony.”

“A satirical belief is a vain and superficial ploy for attention. But if you are genuine, Will, I'm a bit at a loss for how to dissuade you. It's a catch-22. I can't convince you everything is real if you don't believe I actually exist,” Hannibal chuckles.

“I'm not real invested in the whole existential school of thought, Hannibal. I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I don't think we don't exist,” Will laughs, “I just think we're doomed because we're too stupid to save ourselves... from ourselves.”

“So you are a disenfranchised doomsayer. This doesn't exactly rescue you from my skepticism.”

“You can't be condescending to an atheist,” Will argues. “We have too substantial an arsenal to defend ourselves with. Religion is a cosset for the insecure.”

“Science does not preclude faith. Spirituality can extend beyond it's laws. You build yourself a lonely fortress, Will.”

"Perhaps, but for the sake of argument, here's your dilemma. Your God-- your personal version of him, gives you validation for your own, personal code of ethics. A code of ethics that deviates from the norm, which means, you may as well be taking a page right out of the same book. It's called 'moral nihilism' when you opt out of mankind's laws to attend to your own agenda.”

“Only if I never put stock in 'mankind's laws' in the first place,” Hannibal points out.

“But you don't.”

“True,” Hannibal accepts, “But in any case, I am familiar with the concept you're ascribing to me. I admit... I'm curious to how you'll proceed.”

“Easily. Your agenda construed through deistic interpretation is unoriginal. There is a good deal of historical precedent for it. I mean, the uh... immigrant settlers that colonized America and all... they called it 'manifest-destiny', their 'god' gave them the right to commit mass genocide. The doctrine you follow, that you've invented for yourself makes you no better.

You are a classic, self-entitled sophist. You think you're superior to those you 'cull', but their crimes don't fit their punishment to anyone but yourself-- your selection process is self-serving-- you think God has sanctioned you with some kind of authority to build your own utopia."

Hannibal regards Will with a considering smile. "If, during the short duration of my existence I can somehow, in some small way, nudge civilization toward becoming more civil, if in achieving this desired outcome for myself, this also serves some benefit to others, which I tend to believe it does, then have I not done some good?"

"It does but you don't earn magical points for it. Doing something for yourself that has the unintended result of doing something for someone else does not make the action unselfish. It does not cancel out and undo or transform the initial motive. But your question is redundant. You know that."

"Does that align with your personal perspective?" Hannibal asks skeptically.

"It's all quantitative, and then, that presupposes the existence of inherent laws and morals," Will shrugs.

"Which you don't pay any credence to."

"I live in a godless reality, Hannibal. The justice system-- the laws we have to abide by are all just social constructs, intangible contracts we make with each other. Words on paper, orders followed by superiors, all of this is self-engineered. None of these ideas existed before the dawn of man. There weren't rules written in the rocks for any us to follow. We made everything up as we went along."

"That infers there is no meaning to life."

Only the meaning that we give it," Will admits.

Hannibal stares at him curiously. "And that is a concept you are comfortable with?"

"It doesn't matter, it's what I believe. I draw my faith-- or I guess... lack of it from observation. Personal experience."

"Then where do you find your peace?"

Will thinks about this for a moment before looking back at his companion. "Having some, small hope that humankind, though stupid and selfish has it's exceptions. That I can contribute something to them in some small way."

"Even though it doesn't matter because nothing matters?"

"No, everything matters as long as people exist to give a shit about each other."

"You're a humanist trapped inside an optimistic nihilist's body."

"Christ. All the labels," Will groans.

“Between the two of us you're the one who clings to them with the most sincerity.”

“I may be kind of messy, but I like some order.”

Hannibal is quiet for a long minute watching him and Will can't help but feel a little exposed.

“You don't see all the little patterns in the intricate details? All the little coincidental incidences of design are just that? Coincidence?” he asks with honest curiosity.

Will shrugs.

“You're a cynic.”

“Yeah, because I'm sane,” Will agrees a little sullenly. “You're right. It's a lonely fortress.”

“If you decide to start sleeping in a large, ceramic jar, I won't be entirely surprised.”

“The ancients were just men with different resources,” Will defends, grinning slightly. “Diogenese of Sinope was a Walden before his time.”

“He lived by some unusual and rather extreme measures,” Hannibal agrees.

“But he practiced what he preached. Got to give a man credit.”

“Pleasure and pain are measures of what is good and evil. Death is the end of both body and soul and should therefore not be feared; the gods neither reward nor punish humans; the universe is infinite and eternal; and events in the world are ultimately based on the motions and interactions of atoms moving in empty space. His teachings starve humanity of it's hope,” Hannibal criticizes.

“Humanity too often starves itself of it's hope.”

“Your perspective displays your own contempt.”

“Not contempt. Not really. What I feel resembles more of an *ennui* if anything I suppose. Years built upon years of stacking up disappointments tend to create that effect in a person,” Will muses. “For example, I find it disappointing-- actually, *disturbing* that regardless of your brilliance, you insist on clinging to a reliquary ideology-- an antiquated notion of a supreme, sentient authority figure, and I wonder, what's the exchange? What do you get out of it? It feels dishonest.”

“It's a little dishonest,” Hannibal admits. “But then, I think of God as more of a metaphorical entity than a metaphysical one.”

Will dislikes the incongruity. “Then you validate yourself.”

“I prefer a divergent brand of humanism that caters to my exclusive perspective.” Hannibal explains. “You're belaboring under the mistaken impression that my belief in a higher power resembles that fashion of faith that infers we are all locked into position by God's will. I have

always firmly understood my agency, Will. I am neither in denial nor am I the sophist you accuse me of."

"Hannibal Lecter is his *own* master," Will laughs.

"Not entirely," Hannibal confesses quietly. "Not anymore."

"Then if I wanted to cut out your heart--"

"As long as you needed it," Hannibal confirms.

Will is staggered.

"I lay my life in your hands, Will. I knew your decision before you dragged us over the cliff. I didn't particularly agree with the decision, but it was yours to make."

He feels humbled speechless. "That's an unfair responsibility," Will finally manages, his hands trembling.

"It is, but I trust you."

"You told me that you can't be the gauge by which to measure myself, but yet you'll follow wherever the needle points on my compass."

"Wherever it leads us," Hannibal vows.

"You're a lunatic," Will decides, grinning uncertainly.

"But yours all the same," he admits quietly, taking Will's hand and interlocking their fingers. "I believe we only have a few hours before check-out. Would you like to try to go back to sleep?"

"I've got a better idea," Will exclaims, tearing off his sheet. "Let's wake the neighbors."

Straddling Hannibal's lap, he claims his mouth in a passionate, hungry kiss that's received by immediate, equivocal desire.

There is nothing more to be talked about then; dreams, aspirations and all philosophical debate is abandoned for a greater purpose and they lose themselves in each other until the sun rises.

And perhaps, for a little while longer after that.

They forget altogether about check-out.

Chapter End Notes

...

this is not a cop-out of a phenomenal sex scene. I promise you. It's next and it's written.

Chapter 20

Will stirs awake to the pleasant, soothing sensation of fingers gently stroking through his hair.

“Good morning, my dear,” Hannibal greets softly as he blinks open his eyes. “I think it's about time we start the day.”

Bringing his hand up from beneath the covers, Will stifles a long yawn and shakes his head, disagreeing. “No,” he mumbles, closing his eyes and curling against the warm body beside him. Will feels Hannibal's sigh against the top of his head. "This is not exactly a choice," he replies. "Or a request." “Too soon,” Will argues, burrowing back down rebelliously.

"Incorrect," Hannibal corrects. "It's nearly 9. We should've been up over an hour ago."

Will groans. "Maybe the clock's wrong."

"My watch matches the clock."

"Fucking traitor watch," Will grumbles.

Hannibal quakes with soft laughter, He imagines his small, pleased smile even though he can't see it. “We probably already missed check-out anyway,” Will adds, blissfully shuddering a little as Hannibal's nails scrape lightly back and forth against his scalp.

“We have, in fact,” Hannibal informs him, placing a soft kiss on his forehead. “We should have already been halfway down the road by now,” he explains, removing Will's arm and quickly rolling out of bed before he has time to attempt to reclaim him hostage.

Will groans irritably, mourning the sudden loss of his heat source. “Just an extra 5 minutes won't hurt anyone,” he grouses. “The airport's less than an hour away and our flight doesn't leave until 11.” Snatching Hannibal's abandoned pillow, he drags it under, hugging it tightly against himself and mulishly drags the covers back over his head. From outside his sleep-fort, he hears his companion's muffled chuckling.

“Pitiful,” Hannibal chides.

“I'm not a morning person,” Will whines, hating everything.

“That's apparent.”

Stifling an enormous yawn into his stolen pillow, Will at last throws off the covers and glares irately at Hannibal's back as he draws open the curtains just enough to let in a little light. Squinting resentfully at the bright sun pouring into the room, Will forces himself out of bed and scans the floor for his pants.

Blearily tugging them on as Hannibal enters the bathroom, he grabs a shirt out of his bag and decides the effort to put it on is more than he can handle. With a groan, he collapses back

onto the bed. The mattress springs creak loudly in protest, ratting him out.

“Will,” Hannibal calls back at him from the other side of the door, “Get out of bed and get dressed.” His order sounds stern, but he can hear a note of amusement in it. Staring up at the tacky stucco ceiling Will wonders how reckless it would be to sneak in a quick nap until he comes back out.

“I'm not going to dress you, but you will be leaving this room in exactly 4 minutes, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out myself,” Hannibal warns him.

“Like a sack of potatoes,” Will mutters, chuckling.

“Exactly,” Hannibal replies.

He's fairly certain by his tone he isn't bluffing and he's confident the man's strong enough to manage it. He was fit before, but three years locked up with little else to do has done wonderful things for his overall physique in ways that inspire in Will a healthy fantasy or two. He can imagine a few ways this strength might be enjoyed in a different way, which does not exactly help quell his morning wood. The stray, amorous thought dies as he hears the sink running and the sound of his companion brushing his teeth. Will wonders if he can get away with masking his morning breath with a stick of gum or something. God-only-knows where the hell he'd stowed his own toothbrush and he doesn't feel very compelled to get up and locate it when he can barely contemplate putting on the rest of his clothes.

“And aside from the indignity,” Hannibal continues, leaving the bathroom, “You might find being naked outside in the middle of winter not to your liking.”

“I've got pants on,” Will points out.

Hannibal's long suffering-sigh is enough of a response.

“Do you think there's any place to grab a coffee around here?” Will asks, not really knowing exactly where 'here' even is. He watches Hannibal collect both of their phones and unplug the chargers, wrapping them in neat coils before depositing them in the front pouch of his suitcase.

“We can as soon as we're at the airport,” he replies, handing Will his phone.

“Thanks,” Will grumbles, pocketing it. Glancing over at Hannibal, he heaves a dismayed sigh to see him already buttoning up his coat. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Hannibal asks, staring at him like he's grown a second head.

“Mornings. How do you, you know, do them?”

“Through discipline and habit,” Hannibal replies easily. “And in this case, an aspiration to retain my liberty. As much as the FBI publicly denies it, their manhunt is back on, and I do have a sense of self-preservation.”

“Prison wasn't as comfortable as you'd thought it was going to be, you know, when you put yourself there the first time, huh?” Will remarks flippantly.

Hannibal ignores the comment but his expression relays his irritation. Belatedly registering his error, Will cringes, cursing himself for his tactlessness.

It's not as if Hannibal turned himself in because he was out of options. He stayed for one reason. And that reason is kicking himself currently for mentioning it so glibly.

“Sorry,” Will mutters. "I'm an idiot."

“You will be if you don't get dressed,” Hannibal replies coolly. “If we're delayed and wind up back in front of Jack, I doubt he'll give you much benefit of the doubt, Will. You've been missing for a little too long. What sort of excuse will you be able to invent to top Bedelia's? You can't recycle the same lines.”

“Maybe you and I will get to share a cell,” Will offers. "I bet they'd love to study us both. Watch how we interact. Kind of a psychological experiment."

“I think where you would end up might be a little more 'comfortable' than where they send me,” Hannibal muses, letting this sink in. “Padded,” he provides, just in case Will doesn't quite understand what he's getting at. He get it though, and the idea of being surrounded by a bevy of psychiatrists, circling him like vultures eager to ravage through the contents of his skull doesn't sit well.

“Damn it,” Will mutters, reluctantly rolling back out of bed to finish getting dressed.

Hannibal hums quietly to himself as he checks the mirror, combing back his hair before returning to Will to fix his shirt collar, tucking both corners under the collar of his sweater. Will grins to himself, amused by his companion's attentive mothering.

“Do I look presentable?” He asks, unsuccessfully repressing a small grin.

Hannibal grants him a once-over. “Perhaps for the public,” he decides before his dead-pan expression relents into a smirk. “Although I personally prefer you a little more rumpled and with a few less articles of clothing.”

Will feels the hot bloom of a blush redden his ears and bats away his companion's interfering hands as he attempts to tame his unruly tangles but instead winds up discovering his own hands have found a mind of their own as they shuffle under Hannibal's coat, clinging just inside the inner part of the waistline of his pants on either side of his hips, bracketing the other man between his arms. Hannibal watches him with barely guarded amusement and Will's blush spreads to his neck.

Now would be a great time to come up with a casual, flirtatious little quip-- a clever rejoinder to remind his lover he's not an utter awkward idiot--maybe seal it with a quick, teasing peck of a kiss then bounce away and leave him hanging-- instead, Will's eyes unintentionally dart down to his mouth and he's lost.

Glued there, his heart thumping in his chest, he sees Hannibal's soft, supple lips-- lips he knows the feel of against his own. He wants like hell to feel them again.

It would be so easy to simply bridge the gap and continue where they left off last night. They hadn't expanded much further past kissing and groping before eventually succumbing to the sleep they'd both sorely needed. He's close enough to feel the warmth of Hannibal's minty breath waft against his face, close enough that all he need do is lean in just a little more--

Distracted and a little aroused by imagining where this would lead, Will watches Hannibal's tantalizing mouth curl into an impertinent grin and wants very urgently and desperately to kiss it off of him and the bastard knows it. He clears his throat serving to draw Will's attention back up but as soon as he meets his gaze, Hannibal's words die on his tongue and he can tell by the heated glint in Hannibal's eyes and his dilated pupils that should he dare initiate anything, they'll run the risk of taking a risk they can't afford to take. Hannibal, having a better handle on his self-control does Will the courtesy of breaking the spell, saving him the trouble, by responsibly removing Will's hands and taking a small step back, creating enough space to prevent temptation.

“Time constraints,” Hannibal utters finally, with a note of regret. “Schedule permitting... we could revisit this later.”

Will appreciates the concession. “I might hold you to that,” he replies.

“Literally,” he adds to take advantage of the obvious double-entendre he'd set himself up for before Hannibal can steal it from him.

Hannibal humors him with a small smirk, but the amusement doesn't follow to his eyes. “I only have so much restraint, Will,” he cautions, his expression glinting with barely suppressed desire. However unintentionally, this serves only to push Will over his limit.

He'll ask for forgiveness later, he reasons, forcibly grabbing Hannibal by the front of his coat and dragging him into a fervent kiss.

He gets and gives what they both need from it before releasing him.

“There,” Will declares after catching his breath. “Now let me put on my shoes and grab my stuff and let's get a move on.” He only catches a glimpse of Hannibal's astonished reaction as he sweeps away to fetch said items, waiting until his face is hidden from the other man before allowing himself to break out into the wide grin he was holding back. He's damn pleased with himself.

Hannibal is quiet as he stands by the doorway waiting for him. After Will finishes zipping up his jacket he shrugs the strap of his bag over his shoulder, composes his expression and returns a glance in his direction.

“I'm all set,” he reports, “Let's hup-to.”

Hannibal stares back at him with open wonder. “Rather unexpectedly, you're suddenly assertive,” he remarks, closing the door behind him.

“I was always assertive,” Will argues, following him to the key drop-box.

Hannibal eyes him skeptically. “There is an occasional display of pompousness that borders on insolence at times,” he replies unlocking the car. “Which is typically found to be in compensation for insecurity. Frederick is a prime example.”

“Wow,” Will snorts, getting in on the passenger side. “Thank you for the comparison.”

Hannibal spares a look at him. “I don't mean that as an insult.”

“I'm not the least bit offended,” Will drawls staring out the window as they leave the long driveway of the motel, entering onto the main road.

“There is an observed similarity in a single aspect-- a singular aspect, certainly, but it's not a broad, all-encompassing appraisement and personally, I've always regarded your behavioral pattern to lean toward more submissive tendencies.”

“*'Submissive'*?” Will huffs. “Well don't be so damn *subtle*. Tell it like it is.”

“I feared you might get stuck on that term, but don't take it out of context, Will,” Hannibal advises. “I've observed you bounce elastically between obstinance and conformity-- partialling toward compliance with greater regularity.”

“Okay. Maybe resigned compliance,” Will concedes. “You know what they say about fighting fire with fire, right? Doesn't work. I pick my battles.”

“I agree. I also agree it's difficult for one to be assertive when they often tend to surround themselves with classically authoritarian individuals.”

“It's not a preference or anything, I just seem to attract them.”

“I think it's a relief you're no longer intimidated by me,” Hannibal remarks.

Will grants him that, but then this makes him curious. He wonders if he's somehow turned the tables, and in review of some of their past interactions, he thinks there might have been a quiet shift in their dynamic-- It's an intriguing possibility that poses certain opportunities he hadn't previously given much consideration.

Will watches out the window as they merge onto the freeway and touches his breast-pocket where he'd stored his falsified passport Hannibal had supplied him with. He takes it out and fingers open to the ID.

“Are you worried?” Hannibal asks, catching his eyes in the rear-view mirror.

“Not really,” Will decides. “More amused than anything. I think your presumption is interesting.”

“I wanted to always be prepared for the possibility that you might join me. It wasn't presumption, it was hope,” Hannibal corrects.

“'Clarence Starling',” Will winces, glancing back at the ID again. “Really? *Clarence*? There's hundreds of other options, and you choose 'Clarence'?”

Hannibal doesn't provide him with an explanation but Will sees him grinning a little to himself in that maddening, enigmatic way of his and decides it isn't worth worming out any further clarification, assuming it's just another inside joke Hannibal has with himself that will make no sense out of context.

“Well, as long as you keep my name straight in bed,” he grudgingly accedes.

“Noted.”

Switching on the radio for awhile he catches up on the weather and the news. When Will at last sees the airplane symbol on a sign plastered on an overpass, he feels himself grow jittery with anticipation. There is the possibility of arrest and the possibility of starting a new life if everything works out. Either way, before either of these possibilities, there is the certainty of coffee.

Yawning as he stretches, Will decides to finally bring himself around to voicing the question that's been gnawing at him. There's no way to paraphrase it or couch it in softer terms without swinging them back into the circular arguments they seem so prone to.

“Are you intimidated by me?” he finally, bluntly asks.

Hannibal glances at him briefly. There is a reticence and a slight frustration, as if he'd thought the question would be asked earlier but since it hadn't, he'd thought himself safe. He doesn't want to reply, and that means his answer has no choice but to be honest.

Will's fingers curl against his knees as he waits and after a long, drawn out silence, Hannibal looks back at him.

“Often,” he replies truthfully, his expression unreadable as he returns his full focus back to the road.

It's vital knowledge, begrudgingly surrendered and Will wonders how many ways Hannibal has imagined he might find it useful.

He places his fingers lightly on his companion's right hand resting on the armrest between them, and while Hannibal doesn't look back at him, the muscles around his mouth and in his forehead seem to relax a little as Will conveys to him through touch that he won't abuse this knowledge.

Although, this touch was a test in and of itself and he can't help but feel a tiny excited burst of exhilaration knowing the truth-- that it worked. That means it's true.

There's a great deal of evidence to support it, but still, it's been hard to see. Somewhere, at some point, Will became the one that's been calling all the shots.

He's the pilot.

Chapter 21

At the busy, sprawling airport, navigating through the maze of lanes is more of a headache than either had anticipated, and finally, irked by the inconsistency of his GPS, Will irritably turns off his phone and squints out the window, searching the signs for the right exit ramp.

“I think we should just follow the red van. He looks like he knows where he's going.”

“That would have us heading toward the shuttle bay,” Hannibal replies. “We need to turn left after the next intersection.”

Traveling the circumference of the terminal is a long stretch, slowed by traffic. It's fortunate they made good time. Will doesn't want to say it's because they left past rush hour, because that would assume he'd anticipated that in the first place and their morning's delay was not exactly deliberate, but, in any case, the extra hour of sleep did result in a positive outcome.

Will yawns, still a little tired as he watches the planes arriving and departing from the tarmac and it reminds him that very soon, for better or worse, he'll be leaving this country for quite possibly the last time.

It's bittersweet, but that's the least of his concerns weighing on his mind.

“I don't like it.”

“It's the only way it will work,” Hannibal calmly reminds him. “Unless you've the confidence to attempt the heavily patrolled ocean and imagine you can take out the very well-equipped coast guard.”

“Maybe we should've gotten plastic surgery.”

“Reputable surgeons are typically less inclined to accept cash slipped under the table. This is our safest option.”

“Not that safe,” Will mutters grimly.

“Safer than a staph infection in a botched rhinoplasty,” Hannibal points out. “Sepsis can be deadly and a collapsed septum is not only excruciating, but quite disfiguring.”

Will reflexively rubs his nose. “I gather you've witnessed this first-hand?”

“Working surgery in the ER was an enlightening experience.”

Will heaves a heavy sigh. “I don't like that we have to split up,” he laments, running his hand anxiously through his hair. “This place is enormous and swarming with security.”

“It's also swarming with dense crowds.”

“There are cameras everywhere. My face has been flashed on the news nearly every time yours has and that's no insignificant amount.”

“A hat and a good pair of sunglasses can be quite useful.”

“Great, I can look like a celebrity ducking the paps. Oh right, I am a celebrity. Infamous by association,” Will drawls. “I just got to get past our guy in the front. You sure he's going to let 'Clarence' in?”

“Your check-in will go smoothly,” Hannibal reassures him. “And our underpaid fellow at the desk will finally be able to give his wife that expensive bracelet she's always wanted for their anniversary.”

“You're making that up,” Will grins.

“Possibly,” Hannibal concedes. “Regardless, a handsome sum has been paid in advance to ensure all arrangements proceed without a hitch.”

“And you trust this associate of yours?”

“He's a fortuitous acquisition of my accountant.”

“Ah. *The* accountant,” Will clarifies. This explains the implicit trust-- an implicit trust Will does not quite fully understand.

After Hannibal's conviction, his personal accounts, his estate and all his assets had been seized by the court, liquefied and distributed in hefty sums to the families of his many victims-- at least the ones they could prove and charge him for anyway. Will had initially assumed this rendered him impoverished and therefore severed of connections-- connections he would have to pay a retainer to.

For a time, as they had bounced from town to town, it gradually became clear to Will that Hannibal had premeditated everything, carefully distributing his wealth many years in advance for just this occasion-- just as he had kept another house and another few cars, he'd also kept discreetly hidden safes and from time to time, along the way they would pay visits to various storage facilities where there would be yet another stashed stack of cash stuffed in another bag in another locker. But then, just after they blew through the last of what they'd collected, from out of the ether came the sudden occurrence of a steady income via regular wire-transfers-- already cashed, delivered and waiting for them wherever they landed. This implied that he still retained holdings in offshore accounts—which obviously explained how he was paying someone to send it to him.

Will has never taken for granted the way money seems to simply breeze into Hannibal's pockets wherever and whenever he needs it and he's often wondered, but he's never inquired too deeply. When he's carefully pried him for an explanation, all he's been told is that they can thank his accountant.

This is no ordinary accountant. This is someone who can provide services far beyond the management of Hannibal's finances; some kind of magical, highly-capable polymath

employed like a long-distance valet to handle a versatile range of responsibilities. This is someone Hannibal has entrusted to act on his behalf-- someone to do the foot-work, and often, the dirty work. Will finds it difficult to rationalize their bond. Money is a galvanizing force, but he can't help but worry that this level of trust must be born of either kinship, bribery or blackmail.

“And you trust your accountant?” he asks.

“With my life,” Hannibal promises. “For many decades.”

“Been on your payroll that long?”

“While that is a factor, I think it would be an imprecise and crude minimalization to call her my employee.”

Her. It clicks.

“Chiyoh,” Will concludes. *Of course*. Hannibal's secret pet, his surrogate sister-daughter, sometimes lover and always both friend and jailer.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, Will thinks, somewhat bitterly. She's the only person he knows of in Hannibal's life who had outlived her usefulness and survived and then repurposed herself serving as Hannibal's keeper; the angel in the bushes with the rifle, serving her penance.

Why are you important? He would ask her that if they met again.

“It's Chiyoh, isn't it?”

“We were young together,” Hannibal explains. “She knows me well.”

“She told me she's never known herself as well as she knows herself with you.”

Hannibal's expression is thoughtful. “She was a constant fixture in my household in service to my Aunt. I watched her grow. She was taught well.”

“You value her usefulness to you.”

“She has proven invaluable.”

There is a rest of strained silence.

“For all her talents, it seems awfully unusual she remains on your dole,” Will muses. “Her allowance must be... *ample*.”

Will studies Hannibal curiously as he waits for his response. When he fails to provide one, Will decides to provoke one instead.

“She said she knew you intimately. You were 'nakama'.” Will continues. “She told me last time she saw you, you left her with a smile.”

“I was pleased to,” Hannibal replies so remorselessly it sets Will's teeth on edge.

“I'm sure she was just as pleased. But then, you have always had a way of inspiring loyalty. You're the leader of the pack to whom all the wolves defer and when the bitches are in heat, they look to you.”

“Resentment and jealousy are unflattering attributes,” Hannibal replies levelly. “They have the misfortune of rendering their bearer ugly.”

“I don't mean to *pop* your over-inflated ego,” Will retorts. “But I'm not jealous of *them*. ”

Hannibal glances at him curiously.

“From one man to the another, I'm impressed. You mate a bitch and it automatically triggers such a guarantee of loyalty,” he remarks. “You can't bottle and purchase that kind of charisma. What is Don Juan's secret?”

“May every well made investment have it's return,” Hannibal asserts.

Will snorts. “Is it cold in here, or is that just you?”

“Temper your judgment.”

“Well, if you give a mouse a cookie,” Will shrugs.

“I can understand your comparison, but the situation is unique. Chiyoh is an exception. She came along with my inheritance.”

“You took her in and clipped her wings.”

“She was given a choice,” Hannibal defends. “I offered to provide for her if she chose to stay.”

“But there were conditions. Because she wouldn't let you kill him,” Will reminds him.

“It was a reasonable request.”

“You were curious to see if she would do it. If she would take his life to win her freedom.”

“You were curious too,” Hannibal points out.

“I was.”

Hannibal glances over at him. “Were you surprised when she did it?” he asks.

Will pauses to remember how he felt.

“Not really,” he finally decides. “But... *she* seemed to be. I told her you'd be proud of her.”

“I am. She gave herself her freedom.”

“And yet, although she's out of sight, she's never out of reach,” Will muses. “I wouldn't call that freedom. She's shackled herself to you.”

“In some ways, we are bound to each other and she remains in my periphery because that is where she's best suited. She is content there. She's found purpose. It's that purpose which frees her. I... provide for her, and she in turn, provides for me.”

“A mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“Family provides for each other. Each member contributes value to the whole,” Hannibal states. “She's all that remains of my former life. I think of her fondly.”

Will is reminded of his original concern as the giant parking structure comes into view, just beyond the terminal.

“You trust her intent. So you trust her discernment?”

Hannibal rolls down his window briefly to retrieve the ticket from the dispenser. The cold air that floods into the car's cabin before it's rolled back up is sharp and unpleasant and Will tugs his coat collar closer up around his neck.

“It's in her best interest to keep me well,” Hannibal agrees. “Her every action is mindful of this and thus, I trust her decision has been made carefully.”

“So you trust the man she hired? You trust him by proxy?”

“I have little choice but,” he replies. “You sound very worried you'll never see me again.”

“I have little desire to lay down new roots alone,” Will confirms, staring at the rows of cars as they wind through the expansive garage.

“He's only received half of his deposit. It's in our friend's best interest to collect the other half, as Chiyoh will be there to personally oversee the transaction from a relative distance just out of view with a sniper rifle.”

“Even so, he won't know that, but perhaps he should. A friend who can be bought is a friend who can be bought out if there is a more tempting offer. The substantial reward on your head is quite enticing.”

Hannibal glances at Will with a small grin. “Aren't you enticed?”

“Well, if you think I should go for it,” Will shrugs. “I mean, think of all the acres of land I could buy with that kind of money, it would make a great run for the dogs.”

“Go fishing on your own yacht,” Hannibal adds. “Travel the world.”

“Hire a personal chef, retire young, spend out my days in leisure,” Will chuckles, playing along.

“Ironically, that would serve as feasible recompense for the future you would be abandoning, should you opt to abandon me.”

“Yeah, I mean, it would nearly fit the bill, but I would miss all our... *bickering*,” Will smirks.

Hannibal side-eyes him skeptically. “Are you certain that's all you would miss?”

Will shrugs. “Maybe we could arrange some conjugal visitation.”

“There is still an open window for you to crawl out of, but it's fast closing, so you better decide. I have faith you could dream up something convincing for Jack if you put your mind to it.”

“Hello, Jack, guess what? I'm not dead, and Hannibal and I have been roaming the northeast coast hiding from you, but it wasn't my fault, he coerced me with orgasms and an assortment of culinary creations. By the way, Bedelia was delicious,” Will rehearses. “That will definitely work out to my advantage.”

“I think it could use a small measure of improvement,” Hannibal grins. “I don't deserve all the credit. Don't forget to inform him how you orchestrated my release.”

“In all honesty, if I were inclined to ditch you I'd still always be on the run. Bedelia stole the best excuse and it won't sound quite so believable a second time around.”

Hannibal's expression is pensive. “You could tell him you were in hiding because you knew I was alive. You feared for your life. You could return home. You could resume the life you had before.”

“I've so wept for it's loss, I mean, it was going so well in the end there,” Will huffs sarcastically.

“If you're no longer dead, your wife is no longer a widow,” Hannibal muses. “The divorce papers were never finalized. That means there doesn't have to be any messy paperwork to reclaim your assets from your beneficiary.”

Startled to hear Hannibal's tone sounding so genuinely serious, Will glances over at his companion, disturbed to see his expression blank of humor.

“You might consider reconciliation and return to your family.”

Will frowns, angry to find what began as a flippant joke has evolved into a very real suggestion.

“That chapter of my life is closed,” he attests firmly.

“Love can be rekindled.”

“Not if it isn't reciprocated,” Will points out.

“With your past removed from the picture-- if I were removed from the picture, if you cut ties with Jack and by association the danger posed by your former life, and if you perhaps were to move somewhere new, start over fresh, would it be so unlikely that Molly may reconsider her feelings for you? You made a life together once. You were a family,” Hannibal counters. “That is not an easily cast off bond.”

Will hears the weight in his suggestion and knows how much he means it. He has a good sense there is no length Hannibal wouldn't go, no action he wouldn't take to protect, care and provide for his family-- nothing he wouldn't do to keep them either, whether it means murdering for them, or murdering them himself.

“You're right. I do want to go home. To *our* home that we will make for us, because *you're* my family,” Will tells him firmly.

At last, they pull into a vacant spot. Hannibal parks and turns off the car.

“Even now, after all we've been through together since we started this journey, I scarcely believe it even when I hear the audible proof from your lips,” Hannibal admits quietly, pulling the keys from the ignition.

Will unbuckles his seat belt. “Well, maybe my lips would be more convincing if I wasn't using them for talking,” he suggests leaning over the armrest to test the theory.

Hannibal removes his gloves and moves his hand up behind Will's head, wrapping the warm palm of his hand over the back of his neck to press them closer together and deepen the kiss. There is an urgency and a desperation that scares Will, and he prays this isn't Hannibal's silent way of confessing that he's not sure their plan is going to work, or that he's thinking it might be nobler to abandon him after all.

Just in case, Will breaks away just enough to speak, resting his forehead against his companion's.

“This isn't goodbye,” he informs him. “This isn't the last time we'll ever see each other.”

“It isn't,” Hannibal reassures him, adding a last soft kiss to his lips before releasing Will.

Climbing out of the car, Will zips up his jacket again and circles around to join his companion at the opened trunk to unload their travel bags. Slinging his own over his shoulder, Will takes a last look at the Audi as Hannibal tosses the keys onto the front seat and shuts his door.

“I feel almost bad for all the cars we abandon. I hope this one goes to a nice home,” Will grins, patting the hood sympathetically.

“It's very likely to do well at auction,” Hannibal offers with a condoling smile.

Will can't believe this it. They haven't left each other's sides for more than a few minutes at a time in what seems now like ages. He can hardly think what to say, or if there is even anything left to say, so instead, he stares at his companion, drinking in the last sight of him

he'll see until they arrive in Buenos Aires. Hannibal returns his glance, sweeping over him covetously. Will can see the effort he's making to deny himself, to prevent himself from giving into the urge to close the gap between them a final time. Likewise, Will suddenly has a hundred things he wants to say bubbling up to his lips but he won't let himself. It's all better left unsaid for now, he thinks, better left to say when they meet again-- he makes the secret unspoken promise to them both through a wistful smile, a smile he wants so much to look happier and more hopeful than he currently feels.

Hannibal returns the smile and holds out his hand. Will accepts it uncertainly, not particularly enthusiastic over the prospect of parting in such a formal and inadequate manner. However, instead of the handshake he'd been expecting, Hannibal turns over his hand, palm down against the insides of his fingers and leans down to press a soft kiss just between Will's knuckles. The unexpectedly pleasing sensation of his lips and breath against the sensitive top of his hand is exhilarating and intimate and Will feels a rush of adoration he knows his eyes and the slight blush on his face give him away immediately. Still holding his hand, Hannibal looks at him as if trying to preserve for himself a picture in his mind of Will exactly as he is in this moment, as if he's imagining the long stretch of time that will pass between them to be longer than they know it will realistically be and glancing back at this memory will be a panacea in the interim.

“I promise the minute we are reunited, we will never have to be apart again,” Hannibal promises softly before at last releasing his hand.

“Just be goddamn careful and don't get yourself caught or worse, alright?” Will grumbles hoarsely.

“I agree if you agree,” Hannibal counters back to him, picking up his suitcase. Will nods his affirmation.

Please make this work, Will silently prays to himself, training himself forward as they depart, walking away in opposite directions. It takes everything he's got not to look back behind him.

Chapter 22

Getting through check-in is as easy as Hannibal had promised. The stout man with the glasses and birthmark just next to his nose gives 'Clarence' a brief, curious once-over before sliding back his ID along with his boarding pass. After passing successfully through security, Will puts back on his baseball cap and sunglasses. Feeling a second of self-consciousness, he wonders if the anonymity of his appearance looks too intentional; if it might invite speculation rather than discourage it.

Through the dark tint of his lenses, he discreetly scopes out the periphery of the terminal, counting the guards at their posts. None of them give any sign that they've noticed him, but just for the sake of precaution, he spares a quick glance around the perimeter overhead, scanning for cameras. Spotting the one nearest to him, he trains his gaze ahead and ventures forward watching it from the corner of his eye, careful to monitor whether or not it's following him. It passes the test and remains stationary.

Releasing a small sigh of relief, Will reminds himself to relax. It's necessary to remain vigilant, not paranoid, and if he's too tense, he'll be more likely to draw unwanted suspicion. Composing himself with an air of focus to match the vibe of his fellow travelers, he joins the bustling crowd to find his gate.

Through the streaming blur of passing faces Will watches for anyone whose gaze might stray a bit too long at him, but all he can catch are a small handful of the typical fleeting glances that just as quickly bounce off of him again-- nothing out of the norm. Still, he keeps an eye out on every reflective surface he passes, ensuring no one is following him too purposefully.

Once safely inside his gate, Will locates the nearest cafe stand and purchases both a newspaper and a large coffee before settling into a seat toward the back of the tightly packed waiting lounge. Hidden safely behind his open paper, after peeling off the lid, Will blows off the steam from his drink and takes a long, careful sip, scanning over the headlines until his eyes trail over Hannibal's name.

Curiously, he scans the article.

- New evidence from coroner links DuMaurier's murder, prompting FBI to reexamine potential suspects.

-"We are prioritizing all of our efforts into tracking the culprit,"-

- Authorities on the case can no longer deny the similarities between the late psychiatrist's mutilation and that of Lecter's previous victims, nor ignore the fact that he had motive-

- Bodies of both Lecter and Will Graham, former FBI profiler had not been found-

- There are indications that Lecter had been sighted-

- Hoping to suppress any possible panic that may arise from this announcement-

“I said, excuse me,” an impatient voice interrupts.

Startled, Will jolts, hissing as his hot coffee sloshes over the rim of his cup onto his lap.

Folding down the edge of his paper, he looks up cautiously at the security officer standing in front of him.

“Can I help you?” Will asks guardedly, wary of the officer's strange expression.

“Are you reserving the seat next to you, Sir?”

“Uh, no?” he replies, slightly confused.

“Then you have to clear off your belongings for other guests,” the officer firmly orders him.

“Sorry,” a young woman apologizes, drawing Will's attention. In his distracted state of semi-alarm, it's the first time he's noticed her standing there, just a few feet behind her escort. Even bundled in her coat, she's very obviously in the very latest term of pregnancy.

“It's just my feet, you know, can't stand on them for so long,” She explains in a thick southern drawl, patting her large, swollen belly.

“No, please, I'm sorry,” Will rushes back, hurriedly folding his newspaper and shoving it into the front pocket of his bag before clearing it off the seat to make room.

“Have a safe trip, Ma'am,” The officer says, lifting the brim of his cap with a polite nod. He reaches into his case and hands her a bottle of water before departing.

“I didn't mean to be inconsiderate,” he tells her, standing to assist as she lowers herself slowly into the chair. “When are you due?”

“Any minute now, feels like,” she laughs.

“You're not from Florida are you?” Will asks, hearing his accent adopting back a hint of his own southern roots.

The young woman shakes her head. “Naw, I'm from Georgia. That's where all my family from, but I was fixin' to wed a man and he took me to Florida with him, got us all situated there and then gone run off and left me. Now, well... I 'spose I'm kinda stuck there. Don't like it much, but that's the way of it. No use cryin' 'bout it,” she sniffs, rubbing her nose.

Will shifts in his seat uneasily, not sure how to respond appropriately to this stranger's sudden candidness but also keenly aware he's obligated to in spite of his reservations.

He's never been blessed with much in the way of natural social grace, and it's always been a taxing effort to match the patterning of normal conversation but he was better at it at one point. However, since his escape with Hannibal had liberated him from such expectations, he's strayed a little far out of the habit.

“I didn't mean to dump that all on ya like that, since we hardly met proper,” she replies, grinning apologetically. “Must be all these hormones. Makes me into a real mess sometimes.”

“Um, no, it's okay,” Will replies clumsily, mentally tabulating how to best rescue them both from his awkwardness before finally deciding it would be acceptable to convey some kind of concern for her welfare considering her condition. “You got someone to look after you?”

“Why?” She asks, eyeing him skeptically, “You offerin'?”

Will coughs and turns it into a grin, shaking his head, “No... that's not what I meant. Besides I think I'm a little old for you anyway.”

“I don't mind,” She smirks with a flirtatious little wink. “I like my men a lil' seasoned.”

“Sorry. Flattered, but, I'm kind of off the market,” he explains giving a weak shrug.

“Lucky lady,” She smiles.

Will ducks his head, grinning at the floor. If Hannibal were here, he'd probably be a little less amused.

“Plenty in the sea that'd be happy for you to catch em' one of these days,” he promises her.

“Why, bless yer heart, that's real nice of you to say,” she remarks, preening happily. “By the way, can't help hearin' you got a lil' accent there yerself. Not from 'round here either, I take it?”

“Um, the uh, backwaters of Louisiana, actually,” he answers, stretching his arms back behind his head to pop his stiff shoulder.

“That what happened to yer face? You get that scar on yer cheek in a scrap wit' a 'gator?”

Will snorts. “Something like that.”

“Sorry, don't mean to pry or nothin', but what you doin' all the way up here, country boy?”

“Trying to get the hell out,” Will replies honestly. “Don't care much for the weather.”

“I know whatcha' mean, but frankly, in my state, I been catchin' the sweats like nobody's business,” She grins, dabbing the perspiration from her forehead with the edge of a napkin. “Can you hold my drink for a sec? I jus' gotta grab my tissues quick.”

Will takes her water bottle as she fishes through her coat pocket, handing it back to her when she's finished.

“All boarding flight 32 to Miami, Florida,” the loudspeaker announces.

Will smirks at her ironically. “And you just sat down,” he laughs, courteously giving her his hand.

“Jus' my luck,” She mumbles, grinning as he helps her back up. He grabs his bag as well as hers before escorting her into line.

“Carry-on's are to be stowed in the compartments in the aisle above the seats,” the flight attendant instructs them after processing their tickets.

“Have a safe trip. And uh, congratulations,” he tells the young woman after helping her down carefully into her cramped seat.

“You been real kind,” She smiles. “Thank you.”

“It wasn't anything,” Will returns before glancing down at the row numbers to find his own spot.

Once the plane finally lifts off the tarmac, Will fidgets with the vents, blasting himself with cool air and takes a long sip of his coffee. Just one connection left; a brief layover in Miami and then he'll be onward to his new home. He'll take up temporary lodgings at a hotel in Recoleta and then, if all goes as planned, Hannibal will arrive to join him in another few days.

The other man's passage, arranged by the mercenary, will include a dodgy island-hopping adventure to refuel and avoid US customs. It's a much greater risk and one Hannibal refused to allow Will to take.

He tried countless times to convey to him that if he didn't successfully make it back to him, then all this effort wouldn't be worth it anyway, but Hannibal is incredibly stubborn when he puts his mind to it.

Worries whirling through his skull, Will grabs out the Skymall magazine from the slot of the seat in front of him and flips through the pages to take his mind off his headache.

Eventually, the land below disappears underneath a shelf of billowy clouds and Will lowers the shade half-way down to block the bright rays of the unrelenting sun reflecting off the wing and closes his eyes.

A soft beep followed by the pilot's announcement that they are due to arrive in Miami in an hour wakes him. Stretching his cramped legs as much as he can in the compact space he has, he curses whatever asshole designed economy seating to be so unforgiving to it's customers and wishes he'd thought to take a few aspirin in advance.

As the plane finally dips below the clouds, Will blinks out irritably at the sunny terrain where in between the tiny roads and buildings he sees a few light-blue specks of backyard swimming pools and on the edge of the terrain, the vast, aquamarine harbor. They're probably somewhere along the southern coast of South Carolina by now, he calculates.

It's almost surreal thinking that this is last time he'll be on American soil-- so to speak, if the inside of an airport counts.

“'*scuse* me, sorry, jus' need to get through,” Will hears, catching his attention back over to the aisle where he sees the young, pregnant woman from earlier waddling through, holding her belly protectively. He assumes she's heading toward the back to use the bathroom again before the seat belt sign flashes back on.

Will catches her eye, nodding to her with a brief, friendly smile but she doesn't return it. Instead, the young woman remains intently focused on him with a harried, serious expression and stops when she reaches his row.

“Sorry,” she apologizes to the other passenger occupying the seat beside him. “Can I jus' grab my husband to help me for a sec?”

By the determined gleam in her eyes, Will knows better than to argue and quickly masking his bewilderment, he climbs awkwardly over the irked old man next to him tagging along behind the young woman to the back of the plane.

“Hell of a time to join the mile-high club,” he jokes as she pulls open the door to the tiny bathroom stall, grabbing Will by his wrist. “Not going to be a lot of room in there with the three of us.”

She gives him a non-plussed look and drags him in after her, shutting the door quickly behind them.

“We don't have a lot of time,” She explains. “Look, I don't know you, and I don't give a rat's ass what you done, but I gotta tell you somethin' real important.”

“Alright,” Will replies uncertainly, a little taken aback by the coarse tone that's replaced her sweet, southern-bell lilt.

“I think you might be in some kinda trouble. Don't know what it is and don't care, but over the last hour I been thinkin' to myself, *I gotta do the right thing.* I gotta fix what I did because that ain't real fair. 'Specially 'cause you was so nice to me n' all...”

Will feels her hesitation. She's nervous.

“What are you talking about?” He asks in a slow, careful tone, hoping to encourage her confidence.

“Okay, look,” She finally replies. “Lemme' explain.”

Will nods, bracing himself for her explanation as a bad feeling knots itself in the pit of his stomach.

“I'm an inmate down in Miami. They had me up in Philly for the week 'cause they wanted me to testify against my old boyfriend. He wasn't too bad a guy or nothin', but they gave me a deal so I took it, you know how it is,” She said, glancing down at her protruding belly, “Ain't safe where I'm at like this, and they was talkin' 'bout movin' me down to a cozy fed camp instead-”

“Got it,” Will interjects brusquely, urgently hoping she gets to the point.

“So, they was bringing me back, right?” She continues, “Well, after we got in, the officer I was with got a call. I got took to some kinda office, TSA I think? Said they got a opportunity for me. Somethin' I can help 'em with. Said they got some tip-off, didn't go inna details or nothin' but wanted me to help 'em get some proof. I told 'em I ain't no snitch, but they *real good* at danglin' them carrots-”

“They offered to help you get the ball rolling for another appeal to reduce your sentence,” Will surmises. “Of course, in exchange for your cooperation I imagine.”

“Yeah! How'd you know?” She gasps, floored.

“It's a standard bribe.”

“You used to be in law enforcement or somethin'?”

Will shrugs.

“*Damn*,” She replies, blowing out an amazed breath. “You fall pretty far since then, huh?”

“Life sorta threw me a curve-ball, you could say,” Will offers back ambiguously.

“No, I gotcha. So uh, anyways, the officer 'spose to escort me on the flight back was gonna stay behind to keep things lookin' nice n' chill, and I thought, what the hell, a few hours on my own like normal folks gonna be a real nice change, and I got a chance to get out on parole, maybe get to raise my kid m'self-- an' all I gotta do is waggle my big, ol' belly in yer face and get you to-”

“The water bottle the officer gave you-” Will realizes in horror, tightly gripping the back ledge of the sink counter. “They wanted to use it to lift for prints-”

“I been in n' outta the system long enough to know that that shit take time-” She argues, “But if they think they know who you is, and you already in their computer, all they gotta do is match 'dat shit real quick n' they gonna be right there at the gate waitin'.”

Will's heart skips a panicked beat-- she's right-- *he's fucked*.

It's impossible, he thinks, they were so careful. He was sure no one knew where they were-- that means, someone betrayed them from the inside. Whoever it was, he hopes is low enough on the totem pole so Hannibal might still make it out of the country alright.

“Fuck,” Will mutters, “I knew this was gonna happen, I told him, but he was so goddamned *sure* of himself. He promised me-”

“Look, relax,” The young woman orders. “I got a plan.”

Will stares at her distrustfully. “Why are you helping me?”

“Like I said, you was real nice to me. Like, genuine nice. You didn't have to be, but you still was. My mama always said I got this knack, right? I got this thing where I can tell what a

folk's about and I can tell you got a good heart," She states adamantly, poking a finger at his chest.

Will isn't sure how to immediately accommodate the remark since it's so immensely mistaken; he's millions of light years away from being the good man she thinks he is, however, in the same token, he doesn't want to offend her.

While vacillating somewhere between trying to convey his gratitude in a small faltering smile, while at the same time suppressing his skepticism as well as the tempting urge to correct her, she proves far more intuitive than he'd anticipated, calling him out for it in a smug grin.

"I can also tell you don't believe me. Look, I don't care if you don't. But, maybe if I fix you this second chance, maybe you gonna try to turn yer shit around, maybe you won't," she shrugs, "But I bet you anything you gonna at least think about it."

She's wrong, but she's certainly entitled to her opinion and besides, Will is definitely not below letting her believe he's worthy of saving if she volunteering for the job. He has no objections if she wants to help get him out of the scrape she partly had a hand putting him into in the first place.

If this is her way of absolving herself of guilt, why should he stop her?

Not only does it serve to his advantage, but in a way, he reasons, it might be the kinder gesture. Let her keep her naive optimism, he decides. She'll need it in a few weeks when her infant is stolen out of her arms and she's tossed back behind bars, left with only her belief in the existence of goodness to survive for.

Everyone's got to have something, Will thinks. He's got a hope to be happy someday, and although he doesn't like to admit it to himself, that may be just as foolish, so who is he to judge?

"Now when we land, they 'prolly gonna be tearin' through lookin' for you, but I got a good idea and you gonna do what I say, okay?" She tells him, rifling through her tote. Will tries to give her more room to find whatever she's looking for, squeezing himself further back against the sink.

"That lazy ass officer 'spose to come with me didn't notice he forgot his kit in with my stuff before he left, so I still got this," She says, handing Will the small bag. "It's got his electric razor in there. All fancy and battery operated, too. Now, when I get outta here, you gonna get yerself all cleaned up and use a little water to slick back yer hair and you gonna make yerself a lil' less easy to recognize."

Will takes out the electric razor and pushes up on the switch to test it. The razor buzzes to life and Will strokes his beard a little ruefully. He's always felt so naked without it.

"See? Works good," the young woman grins. "Okay. So then, when yer done with all that, a few rows up from you, yer gonna see a guy that looks kinda like you. I spotted him earlier when I was lookin' for ya, I even thought you was him for a minute. He's got a beard and yer

same kinda face. Looks real unhappy, too, shoved between a fat guy and the aisle. You gonna offer to exchange seats, make up any excuse I'm sure he'll be happy to take you up on it. I kept watchin' him get bumped in the knee by the beverage trolly-"

A sudden abrupt knock interrupts her mid-sentence.

"Do you need any help?" A flight attendant asks, muffled through the door.

"No we good. Just finishin' up," the young woman calls out, buying them a little more time.

"I've heard worse schemes," Will shrugs, adjusting the setting on the razor to remove the first layer of scraggle. "I don't have anything to lose by trying."

"Not at this point you don't. When we all file out, keep back, let them find him and that'll be the distraction you need to slip past. Pray security don't keep us on board, 'cause if they do, honey, you best be hopin' you got the baby Jesus on yer side to save you."

"Ladies and gentleman, as we start our descent, please make sure your seat back and tray tables are in their full upright position-" Will hears announced from the intercom.

"Kinda feel like I look a little like the baby Jesus at the moment," Will mutters, splashing water on his chin before finishing his attack on the remaining stubble underneath his chin.

"Naw, you look handsome," She giggles. "Hurry up though, will ya? We gotta get back out there or they'll start suspectin' we're up to somethin' funny."

"Wouldn't want to spoil your reputation," Will snorts, rinsing out the sink and wetting a comb before dragging it back through his hair to slick down the curls.

"Ha ha, aren't you a riot," She retorts as he replaces the comb and razor back in it's kit. She shoves it quickly down into her tote and gives him a once over. Licking her thumb, she pushes back a few loose strands from his forehead. "That'll have to do in a pinch. Now you all set?"

"Set as I'll ever be," Will grumbles as she squeezes past him to push her way out of the stall. He tags along after her back up the narrow aisle to her seat before helping her back down into it.

"Thank you," he whispers to her quietly. "I mean it. I'm grateful."

"*It wasn't anything*," she returns, parroting back his earlier words with a meaningful look. "Now shoo."

Will spares her a last, small smile before grabbing his bag out of the overhead compartment. Scoping out the seats for his mark, he locates him, and to his good luck, just as his friend had promised, the guy really does bear a decent resemblance.

"Hey, I don't mean to bother you," Will says, clearing his throat anxiously, "But, uh, I get kind of motion sick if I'm sitting near a window when we're landing, you wouldn't mind switching seats, would you?"

Surprised by the great offer, the man's eyes instantly light up. “I wouldn't mind at all,” the stranger replies, more than thrilled to exchange spots. “Mind the drool, though,” he warns, grinning as he nods at the large, snoring passenger stuffed into the seat next to him.

“Oh,” Will adds quickly, removing his sunglasses from his pocket, “You might need these, it's sunny out there.”

“Hey, thanks, pal. Aren't you going to need them back though?”

“Don't worry about it, just got them as a back up at the airport but I've got a spare in my bag and my wife keeps bitching if I bring home one more pair we're gonna have to get a bigger house,” Will jokes, pleased as the man accepts them and immediately puts them on.

“Buddy, you're a life-saver. You can tell your wife thanks from me, too,” he laughs after retrieving his carry-on. “Have a good trip.”

“You too,” Will nods back as he settles into his new seat.

As the plane descends, he sucks in a few slow breaths to calm his frazzled nerves. Whatever happens, he's got to be prepared to move quickly.

Before they've finished rolling slowly up the tarmac to reconnect to the gate, Will peers up the aisle to the front, spotting a flight attendant peaking around the corner, speaking to someone quietly over the phone. She's nodding and looking directly at Will's former seat where his unfortunate doppleganger now sits unaware. He suspects she's confirming his description.

Perfect.

“Attention all passengers,” the pilot announces, “Please check around your seat for any personal belongings you may have brought on board with you and please use caution when opening the overhead bins as heavy articles may have shifted around during the flight. Thank you again for joining us on this trip and we hope to see you on board again in the near future. Have a nice day.”

No unusual requests. Nothing out of the ordinary, but he knows he's still far from being in the clear. They're likely handling this as discreetly as possible to keep from rousing alarm.

As the passengers crowd into the aisle to file out, Will pushes his way up to ensure he's neither too close to his scape-goat, nor to far away to make a quick exit when they detain the guy.

Keeping low-key, he walks slowly through the hall with his cell phone in hand, pretending to be engrossed with it to give him a realistic excuse for keeping his face tucked down while keeping his eyes fixed to the other man's back until he reaches the exit where Will can see standing guard several TSA agents flanked by security.

Immediately, the bewildered man is pulled aside for questioning and Will speeds up his pace. Following close behind a large family, he ducks out around the corner of the exit. As he

passes the officers, he overhears their detainee protesting indignantly and catches a glimpse of him scrambling nervously through his pockets for his wallet to show them his ID.

Any second now they will all piece together what happened which means, Will has only seconds to get out of sight before they start searching the terminal. Knowing they're likely to shut down the exit bay in a manner of minutes, Will jogs over to the flight desk praying they'll have a standby for the next flight currently boarding for Buenos Aires.

“Hi,” Will pants, slightly out of breath reaching into his coat for his wallet.

“What can I help you with today, Sir?” The agent asks.

“I was hoping I could get a ticket for flight 44.”

“Hold on just a quick moment as I look that up. It looks like one standby is still available for 12:05, but they are currently boarding,” she informs him.

“Yeah, I know, that's fine,” he replies, shifting his weight back and forth on his feet nervously as he waits.

“Alright, then if I could just get your photo ID and a form of payment-”

Will slides a sizable wad of cash across the counter.

“And your ID, please?”

“That's double and a half the cost of the ticket,” Will tells her quietly, giving her a strained smile.

She catches his eyes and nods, understanding.

“Thank you for traveling with Southern Continental, have a safe trip, Sir, and enjoy your stay in Argentina,” She says handing him his new boarding pass.

He can hardly believe how easily she took the bribe, but he doesn't have time to look that gift-horse too far in the mouth.

Darting quickly through the crowd, Will makes it just in time to the gate just as they're finishing boarding the last disabled passengers.

“One more,” he calls out, jogging up to the scanner.

“Just made it,” the gate officer tells him.

“Right in the nick-of-time,” Will bounces back, his heart racing.

“All attention, Ladies and Gentleman, this is a TSA security mandate lock down. At this time, we will be suspending all further flights departing after 12:15 Eastern Standard Time. Until further notice, we ask all travelers to remain patiently at their gate before boarding-”

Will walks as rapidly as possible down the hall to the plane, the announcement nipping at his heels.

“Welcome aboard, Sir,” he's greeted by a less than enthusiastic attendant. She glances at his pass and her expression immediately transforms into a pleasant smile. “Please, allow me to show you to your seat and I can stow your items for you.”

Will beams at his luxurious first-class seat accessorized by a flat screen TV and a freshly plumped pillow.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome aboard Southern Continental flight 44, non-stop service from Miami, Florida to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Our flight time will be 9 hours. As we will be departing shortly, we ask that you please fasten you seat belts and remain seated for take-off.”

Watching out the window, Will grips his armrests nervously as they roll down the tarmac, praying nothing turns them back around before they get into the air.

As soon as the edge of the coast disappears from view and all he sees is the crystal blue ocean below, he settles back in his seat with a blissful sigh of relief.

“May I provide you with any refreshments, Sir?”

Will lazily rolls over his head to glance up at his server. “I'll take a bottle of your best champagne,” he orders frivolously.

“Are you celebrating an occasion?” She asks as she pops the cork and fills up a flute.

“Right on the nose,” Will grins taking his glass without providing any further explanation.

She nods politely and leaves him with the menu, a pen and his immigration papers.

Raising his glass in the air, he thinks of a toast. “*Leaving forever... and never to return*,” he cheers to himself before taking a drink.

Chapter 23

For awhile, buzzing on a bubbly inebriation and the euphoric tail end of the endorphin high from earlier's narrow escape, as the plane travels over the Gulf ascending into the clouds, Will is ushered into a pleasant daydream.

Closing his eyes, he sees an idyllic, white sand beach and the blue sky above, crystal clear. As he watches the sparkling waves roll into shore he can feel the warmth of the sun soaking into his skin.

"If you are not too long, I'll wait for you here the rest of my life," Hannibal promises him quietly, threading together their fingers.

Will indulges the moment's reprieve, clinging to it dearly for as long as he can, but soon, it starts to slip out of his reach as he's gradually recalled back to reality. Although he may have gotten away by just the skin of his nose, his relief serves little to assuage his growing anxiety over Hannibal's yet unknown fate. With no means at his present disposal to contact him, it's hard to keep from dwelling on the possibilities. Finishing up his champagne, Will glances at the in-flight cocktail menu hearing the siren's call of his father's old vice, and soon, the empty bottle is exchanged for a full glass of whiskey.

Over the years, he's grown to feel a sympathetic resemblance to Job: notorious victim of God's cruel sense of humor. The man was tested time and again and beleaguered by countless, various misfortunes, he endured with noble patience. Finally, in the end, Job was rewarded richly for his suffering.

God may be capricious, but Will knows the Universe is ambivalent, and it's in the latter that he puts stock. Figuring the odds from an unbiased, mathematical perspective, he's long overdue for a win-- but that doesn't mean he'll get one. Gambling is always a risk. It's why you always find the bar so well stocked at the casino-- tends to take the edge off when you're betting your life on the dice roll.

Having years of insight into the criminal world, he knows that any mercenary worth his salt follows a strict code of conduct. To protect his livelihood means to protect his reputation. Once the deal is sealed with that final handshake, no bribe will sway him from his course. From his past experience on the other side of the table, these guys are the toughest nuts to crack.

It's difficult to pinpoint just where the plan went belly-up, but then, Will knows trust is a fickle mistress: *he'd trusted Hannibal as implicitly as he knows Hannibal had trusted Chiyoh--*

Staring down at the ice-clinking against his glass, Will sucks in a breath, seized by a sudden realization. Jogging back through his memory to when he'd first met the woman, he tries to recall exactly what his impression has been of her-- what were her feelings for Hannibal?

She had spoken of him with trepidation-- and yet, in the same breath, with such unusual regard.

"How do you know Hannibal?" He'd asked.

"One could argue, intimately," She'd replied.

Nakama-- it's a Japanese word for very close friends.

Morbid curiosity drove him to probe, but in the same stroke, he was dreading the chance she might confirm his suspicions.

"Yes... we were nakama. Last time I saw him, he uh... he left me with a smile." There was something wistful in her tone, and although her answer was vague, he could hear what it implied.

There was something Hannibal had said to Bedelia: *The capture-bond is a persuasive force.*

All morning he'd been quietly agonizing over their plan-- he'd hated it from it's conception and he'd let his feelings sour his overall mood. When he'd finally managed to pry from Hannibal the identity of his secret, trusted associate, it was the final straw.

Chiyoh had been a secret sore spot for Will for awhile and he'd long resented that little claim she'd had on him, but Hannibal hadn't known any of that until Will had made the over-reactive, melodramatic decision to very concisely illustrate the fact. In retrospect, he knows it was a self-destructive, cheap jab stemming out of obvious insecurity, and the second the words came tumbling out of his mouth into the open, they both heard the underlying truth:

"She said she knew you intimately. You were 'nakama'," He'd boldly asserted. *"She told me last time she saw you, you left her with a smile."*

"I was pleased to," Hannibal had retorted, his confirmation cusping on cruelty. The answer tells Will quite plainly that his jealousy is merited. He remembers how hard he'd tried to keep his tightly clenched fists from shaking.

Instead of changing the subject, Will had dug himself a deeper hole, striking back acidly and in return, naturally, he'd been called out on it: *"Resentment and jealousy are unflattering attributes,"* Hannibal had coolly informed him. *"They have the misfortune of rendering their bearer ugly."* The memory of the pronouncement still stings. Will was properly embarrassed, and worse still, he knew Hannibal was right.

And then, he'd figured it out. Chiyoh's feelings were Hannibal's perfect leverage. Suddenly, instead of envying the woman, Will found himself pitying her and what's more, he suddenly realizes, that might explain exactly how the plan had failed. She very likely may have gleaned the true nature of Will's relationship with Hannibal. Jealousy and spite would make for good motivation to sabotage...

And well, she did push Will off a train, and rubbing his shoulder, he vividly remembers that one time in Florence when she'd shot him... but then, he does consider both of those instances

had been for Hannibal's protection, and additionally, factoring into account what they had both confided to Will of their peculiar, indebted bond to each other, perhaps their trust in Chiyoh had not been misplaced after all.

Chiyoh's strange infatuation with Hannibal defies rationality, but then, he's not blind to the parallel. The magician casts a persuasive spell that when it so suits him, can be wielded as effectively as any weapon.

When the server comes back around, Will orders a second drink. Aware he's fast approaching the courteous cut-off point, to avert any reluctance or irksome look of disapproval, he slips the young man a generous tip.

The mellow amber of the liquid in his glass draws back to mind the exact color of Hannibal's eyes as he'd looked at Will in his sunlit fantasy from earlier. With an anguished breath, Will closes his eyes and tries to draw back the image, his heart clenching with a keen ache of longing.

Even imagined, just the mere image of Hannibal stirs in him such an extraordinarily visceral response he can't help but groan.

Hands unsteady, Will sets down his drink and sighs. The man undoes him in so many ways he never expected would be possible.

He supposes, even though it took years to finally realize and accept his own physical attraction to Hannibal, he's always, at least objectively known the man is handsome. Superficially speaking, with classically chiseled features and an enviable physique that conform to a universally lauded pith of the masculine ideal all supported by a swooning coterie, there is more than enough evidence to confirm the opinion as fact.

All the lure of the outer wrappings would be lost on Will were it not for the way he comports the package with such alluring artistry. Hannibal's unusual, strangely enthralling dichotomy of mannerisms is fascinating to dissect. There are no specifically effeminate affectations, but there is something just a little epicene in the fluid refinement of his coordination; the way he moves with such cat-like, graceful self-assurance-- as if he knows intuitively both the limit and extent to which every inch of his body is capable of-- and the thought of it sends a shiver of thrill through Will as he imagines just how this might be explored...

There is something also about his outer calmness and confidence that's extremely compelling. This is the version of Hannibal that Will knows he puts on for his patients and the authorities and to lure in his victims. It's the type of demeanor that invites the trust of others-- others whom have never seen and would never suspect the dangerous predator lurking in the fold.

This Hannibal is the lion crouching in the tall grasses of the savanna, radiating with an imposing, unquestionable authority, capable of being as volatile as a powder keg and Will has seen first hand what happens when the match is struck and the fuse is lit. Just imagining it sparks aflame his lust. This was the Titan who slayed the Dragon and thirsted for Will as he'd marveled at the blood on his hands glistening in the moonlight.

But when Hannibal lets down his guard-- or in Bedelia's words: *when he takes off his person-suit*, Will catches a glimpse of the man he wants to take to bed.

Smirking to himself, he remembers earlier this morning when Hannibal had referred to him as *'submissive'*.

As exquisitely fluent as Hannibal is in the English language, Will occasionally forgets it's not his native tongue and can't help but occasionally flinch a little when the man selects a words and misuses it, unaware that although the word may carry several similar variations in definition, the same word can also hold entirely different meanings in different contexts, and in this particular case, the word 'submissive' tends to favor a specific association-- one that the insecurity of heteronormative masculine culture is inclined to cringe away from.

Will knows Hannibal hadn't intended any sexual context, but still, finding himself inevitably hopped aboard that train, it was impossible to ignore the poignancy.

There has always been the power-play; the interesting back-and-forth shift of control between them and Will is beginning to suspect there is something about their dynamic that's resistant to compromise because they both may be too intrigued by the exchange.

It's something he'd love to explore further in a more intimate setting, especially considering the sexually-charged tension that's only escalated over the past few months, but excluding the embarrassing incident that first time in the shower, the only other time in the past few months they've come remotely close to anything approaching sex was last night. But then, in the weeks following the night they'd killed the Dragon and fallen off the cliff was a long, arduous period of recovery, and if the physical injuries alone weren't enough to delay the subject, the trust Will had broken between them certainly was and that was a slow healing fracture.

Will still has a fuzzy recollection of those first couple nights as Hannibal had tended to him. He'd faded in and out for awhile, but he remembers the gentle way the man had so carefully cared for him: changing his bandages, cleaning his wounds, draining the worst one in his shoulder when it had become infected and nursing him through the fever that followed like some kind of Florence Nightingale; never giving up on him.

Will doesn't vividly recall the nightmares he'd awoke screaming out of, nor what terrible phantoms crawled out of the delirium after him, but he does remember being wrapped in strong arms and the feel of his face laying gently cradled against a warm chest. For awhile, consciousness was tenuous, but every time he returned, his protector was still there, holding him safely.

When the fever finally broke, he remembers his first thought was to thank the angel that saved him.

Framed by a halo of soft, glowing light, at first, all Will could make out was the outline of a silhouette and then as his angel leaned down, the shimmering rays spilled over his shoulders, filtering through the translucent fan of his eyelashes to illuminate his familiar, tender smile. When he saw Will was finally awake again, he's spoken something, and although Will hadn't understood them, he'd thought the words had sounded very kind. As he laid there gazing up at Hannibal, he remembers thinking that he was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He also remembers that for several nights after, his companion would hold him as he'd drift to off to sleep. The nightmares stopped after that and then, not long after he'd mostly recovered, so did every type of physical contact.

For awhile at night, he'd lay awake in self-loathing, staring at Hannibal's back as he lay on the furthest end of the bed, hugged tight against the edge. When he could, the man would request separate beds, and they would sleep apart. And then finally, when the accommodations were less fortunate, he would try to ignore the hunched posture of the lonely, sleeping figure uncomfortably tucked in the chair on the opposite side of the room, and in the mornings, even when Hannibal would limp about a little stiffly, still, Will could not bring himself to comment. Once or twice, he'd quietly suggested they switch off for a night, but Hannibal declined every offer and he knew there wasn't a chance in hell he'd remind the man that he was always willing to share the other side of the bed.

Additionally, there was a renewed, unspoken policy of modesty. If he were to take off his shirt, he'd glance up to find Hannibal had averted his eyes or turned his back. Or, if Will were still in the room and Hannibal needed to change, he'd excuse himself to the bathroom. He was so maddeningly polite it was driving Will up the wall.

If things weren't tense enough, there seemed to be some kind of taboo against bringing up what had happened. It was not to be mentioned, even subtly referred to-- like some kind of enormous, unresolved elephant in the room: no explanations, no accusations, no apologies.

In their current situation holed up in tiny motel rooms and driving for hours through the dead of the night, their schedule was sporadic and Will spent a good portion of his time either sleeping too much or not sleeping enough and wishing he could go back to sleep. Every time he looked in the mirror, the only thing that looked back at him were his bruised and bloodshot, lifeless eyes, his bored frown so habitual these days the creases around his mouth were nearly etched into permanence, and the disfiguring scab in the middle of his cheek crossed over by a neat row of tiny stitches that his scraggly, overgrown beard couldn't reach to hide.

The days crawled by, one after the next and the dull, often cramped, isolated claustrophobia that was gradually becoming his life was wearing him thin. Restricted in their outside interaction to brief, business transactions with a various blur of hotel clerks, gas attendants and cashiers behind their registers, all they had was each other. If Hannibal ever noticed him slipping into depression, he didn't mention it, and that was either because he hadn't noticed or it was all a natural, expected part of his punishment.

Still, during the day, he never felt too lonely. At least not in the traditional sense. Hannibal made easy conversation with him and sometimes, Will could forget nothing was different between them; nothing was wrong. But then, by evening, discussion would wane and eventually Hannibal would abandon him, finding other ways to occupy his time before retiring silently to sleep again in whichever piece of furniture was furthest away. Will ached, hating their distance and grew quickly to dread the sunset.

This rift Hannibal had driven between them was his fault and he accepted it, but Will felt his penitence every minute of every hour. This strict, almost draconian enforcement of boundaries was eating a hole inside his chest and he wondered how much longer this could

last-- how much longer he could hold out. But then, he'd stop to think about it rationally and feel a little foolish. It's not as if they'd touched much before. Years ago, as his patient, their contact had always been limited, crossing the invisible red-tape of appropriate doctor-patient conduct was forbidden; but then, Hannibal was a far cry from ethical, and there were a few encounters that breached the rule in ways that had they been observed, would raise eyebrows and possibly restraining orders.

Only in the last two days before the Dragon, had their interaction escalated, and then, well, aside from a few chaste kisses and a couple of good ones, he'd felt Hannibal pressed against him once in the shower, but then, he'd made it clear he wasn't interested in advancing further until they could be certain to trust each other and then, well, of course Will had blown that chance right to hell.

It wasn't long before he started to miss his old life. It wasn't home anymore, not now anyway, but with Molly and Ben he'd grown accustomed to the simple, familiar pleasure of the day-to-day kind of contact that occurs so routinely between family. Even Alana or Jack would shake his hand or pat his back and in lieu of anyone else, at least he had his dogs.

He'd taken all of that for granted he'd realized, choked with regret for whom he'd given up for Hannibal and then finally, pierced by guilt and self-hatred for what he'd so rashly destroyed between him and this man whom he might have built a life with. They were little more than strangers now. There was even a stilted tone to their conversations these days, and every time Will would get up the effort and courage to try to bring back even the smallest fraction of what they'd once had, Hannibal would get a strained look on his face and make an excuse to be some place else-- anyplace out of sight of Will.

Out of sight, out of mind, Will had concluded, feeling wretched and dehumanized.

He often wondered: *what was holding Hannibal back?*

Why didn't he just get up early one day and leave him behind? Will couldn't understand it. He'd been demoted from tolerated company to nuisance, and by the way the man was consistently avoiding him as much as he could in their present, confined circumstances, Will knew he must have seemed to him like a constant, cruel reminder of his mistake. Then why not scratch out the mistake?

Sometimes, in his darkest of moods, he would wonder if he hated Hannibal, but then, almost instantly he'd feel struck by shame. *You're lucky you're even alive to humor the thought*, he'd remind himself, and every night, just as Hannibal would close himself off, and once more Will would start feeling the pernicious creep of resentment, he'd remind himself again: *You led this man to believe that you wanted to share your life with him and then you betrayed him. This man saved your life, even after you tried to kill him— and when you were nearly on the brink of death, this man who should have despised you and left you to die, instead, held you in his arms and nursed you back to health, saving you a second time, you ungrateful prick.*

It wasn't long after he remembers beginning to seriously consider leaving-- sparing Hannibal the imposition. But then he'd realize, even if he were to turn himself in, even if the FBI didn't want to charge him, he'd been legally dead long enough for the paperwork to go through in a

few ways that would not be easy to reverse. What would he even do if he was released? Where would he go when they clear his name and reissue his social security card? He couldn't go back to Wolf-Trap. Molly and Ben would be gone-- they would've taken the dogs. What would be left?

After the turmoil and pain he'd put them through and the grief his death would have left them in, he couldn't bear the thought of taking back the inheritance they would have received from his estate, nor could he allow Molly to suffer the humiliation of having to return the check to the life-insurance company.

And then, he found himself saddled with an even greater fear: What if she suggested he come home-- work on their marriage-- try to be a family again?

Her kind-heart and forgiving nature would oblige her to make the offer, and Will would face two horrible options: the first would be to decline, but to face her disappointment even one more time-- after he'd given her more than a lifetime's share in the short three years of their marriage alone, not even mentioning what it would do to Ben--

Then what? Sign the papers officially, carry forward with the divorce proceedings?

The alternative is he accepts. They move far away to somewhere nobody knows who they are. He gets a safe job doing something that never fulfills him but at least brings in a steady paycheck to cover the mortgage. He tries to rebuild a life with a family that no longer knows who he really is and will never know. He has to have the decency to at least protect them from himself, and that means he will have to forget the past-- forget Hannibal.

He sees the man every single day and he's forgotten him anyway, so what does it matter?

But he knew it did matter. It would always matter-- *Hannibal will always matter.*

Finally, Will remembers the despair-- the resignation he'd felt as he'd at last accepted he had no choice. There was no alternative; he would have to live out his days pining for the way things could have been, trapped in the half-life Hannibal had committed him to by saving him-- and then, with a bitter taste in his mouth it had occurred to him--

Hannibal had never asked for his permission. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The thought sticks in his head.

Almost three weeks passed like this and then one morning, Will stared blankly at his bowl of cereal until the flakes drowned in the milk, turning into a soggy mush.

He had no appetite. He didn't feel sick, not physically anyway, but nothing could compel him to lift his spoon to his mouth. What was the point?

After Hannibal finished his breakfast, he'd glanced across at him and then down at his spoiled meal and without remark, stood to clear the tiny table of the paper dishes, disposing them in the trash before heading into town to fill up the tank for the next leg of their journey.

Will remembers sitting on the foot of the bed for awhile staring at Hannibal's med-kit, vaguely wondering if there would be anything strong enough to put him to sleep and lethal enough to make sure he would die before his body would have a chance to reject the poison.

He goes so far as to pull out a bottle of oxy's. But then, tiredly, he realizes, he'd have to eat to even keep one pill down and the prospect of aspirating on his own vomit is less that appealing.

But, not all's lost, he'd grinned darkly to himself setting the pill bottle on the nightstand in plain view. It was very spiteful, but it would prove a point. And if nothing else, it would possibly be a little entertaining, and he hadn't had much of that lately. Searching back through the bag once more, Will remembers finding a bottle of alprazolam. He'd popped enough for a relaxing afternoon nap and drifted to sleep.

Next, he remembers being shaken violently awake-- Hannibal's brutal grip on his shoulders—his voice too loud and desperate and scared—*"Drink this!"* He'd been ordered, and startled so abruptly from his sleep and in the moment of confusion, forgetting why Hannibal might have any reason to have completely gone off his rocker, his hand had defensively flown up, knocking the bottle out of his face.

It was probably Ipecac, he realizes in retrospect. The man's a doctor, he should have probably expected this would be his first response. If he hadn't accidentally popped it out of his hand, Hannibal would have probably already had his mouth pried open and managed to get at least half the contents down his throat before he could have stopped him, which would not have made for a very pleasant evening, Will grins. Not that he wouldn't have deserved it. It was a pretty dirty trick.

But, dear God, the man was so fucking terrified, He remembers. Will can still recall the exact choked look of panic on Hannibal's face and he was so pale. For a second, he remembers being a little worried his companion might be on the verge of a heart-attack and thinking fast, he leaped forward and seized him by the wrists.

"Stop," he'd demanded, "I didn't take any, I swear."

Hannibal had stopped as he was told, staring at Will mistrustfully.

Taking mercy on him, Will gave him the obligatory explanation. Yes, he knows he's the scum of the earth, but the look on his face is priceless. Hannibal's face was beet red all the way from the collar of his shirt right up through his scalp. He was so angry he was shaking and his hands were clenched into fists at his sides and Will remembers laughing so hard, tears had streamed down his face with his mirth.

He wasn't sorry. It had been worth it just to see his reaction. Finally, as he'd reached up to scrub the wet streaks from his cheeks, he remembers that moment when he'd realized they were no longer from any amusement. *Relief, sorrow, regret...* and all along, as he'd sat recovering from his hysterical outburst, Hannibal had watched him.

He'd taken a seat by the bed and his hands were folded tightly in his lap. There was something disquieting and decisive in his eyes, and Will remembers feeling a little unsettled--

a little frightened.

Afterward, Hannibal has risen, and without another word, packed their bags and checked them out of their room. He remembers wondering if he'd pushed him too far, and then, after an hour's drive of tense silence, knowing he had.

This time I've really fucked up, he remembers thinking. *This is it. Next stop, he'll drop me off, toss out my bags after me and tell me it's done.* At first he thinks, maybe it's for the best. And then, relief bleeds into fear.

I'll never see him again, he realizes in horror, and he's so fucking distraught it paralyzes him, and for awhile, all he can do is stare blankly out the window, nervously biting the inside of his lip until it's raw.

He remembers tonguing the sore he'd chewed, and then, tasting the slight, coppery tang, he'd touched his mouth and looked down at the blood on his finger tip.

When he'd looked up again, he'd caught a glimpse of Hannibal in the rear view mirror, watching him with a tense, indecipherable expression. He looks like he's working something out in his head and Will figures he's trying to think of a way to break it to him that he's given up--that in some odd miles from here, he'll drop him off at the next rest stop with some cash for a bus home.

Will remembers exactly what he'd planned to say in response.

"You were the only home I still had," this was what he was going to tell him because of course he was sorry-- but maybe if Hannibal hadn't treated him like he was a burden, just some kind of cross he had to bear-- if maybe they'd both tried a little harder, he'd spoken up sooner and they'd given it a little more time...

However, all Will really wanted was for Hannibal to touch him. Just once. But he never did, and in the end, Will had felt so repugnant-- so miserably unwanted and terribly alone he would've welcomed death to even a moment more of this torment and then, just as he'd had the thought, Hannibal had pulled over onto the curb and put the car into park.

Will had watched him apprehensively, wondering if he'd somehow read his mind, because with the wide country road in the dark of the night-- no other cars traveling from either side in sight and a dense wall of corn stalks to his right--

"I promised you I would never leave you," Hannibal reminds him quietly. "And I also promised you that if you ever tried to leave me that you wouldn't get far."

His mouth is bone dry and when he tries to swallow, he can't.

"If there's one thing you should always remember, above all else, I am a man of my word, Will."

He's speechless and he can't stop his hands from trembling, *this is really happening*.

“I'm sorry, Will,” Hannibal utters gravely, his hoarse voice cracking a little over Will's name. “I truly regret that it's come to this.”

Will hears the click of his companion unlatching his seat belt and his heart leaps into his chest when he sees Hannibal reach toward him.

“This has gone on long enough, and it ends here,” he explains, brushing his fingers lightly over Will's cheek.

The unexpected caress is so tender, it humbles Will, and choking a small, surprised gasp of pleasure he instantly leans into it.

“We're neither of us made of stone,” Hannibal whispers, his fingers curling under Will's jaw to gently cup his chin, and he's so overcome, all he can do is try remember to breathe. He's longed for just the most meager of contact for so many weeks that as he feels his companion's warm hand against his skin, he struggles not to let the tears swelling in his eyes slip from their corners.

And then, when he feels the smooth tips of the man's fingers stroke down the length of his neck, Will shudders a moan and his eyes roll back, fluttering closed. Hannibal's trek continues, grazing back up to loop around his adam's apple, and he's so hypersensitized, every touch shocks a small jolt of ecstasy straight to his groin. With the slightest application of pressure just against his jugular, Will is as hard as a rock, canting up his hips reflexively and dropping his head back, whimpering a tiny, needy whine he knows sounds embarrassingly desperate-- but he doesn't care-- he just never wants this to stop.

He doesn't dare beg for more, but trapped in his car seat with Hannibal teasing him to abandon with only the tiniest strokes of his relentless, talented fingers is both more than he could ask for and not enough, and surrendering to his urgency, Will presses the palm of his hand flat against his trapped erection.

The second he touches himself, he hears Hannibal groan, and *Christ,* he's amazed he doesn't bust a seam.

After weeks of deprivation, rubbing himself frantically through the fabric of his pants as Hannibal sits beside him watching him while tracing trails over his throat is such an exquisite, unbelievable experience he knows if neither of them slow down or stop, he'll climax in a manner of moments but as Hannibal's hand at last wraps around his throat, he realizes that if he's about to die anyway, it hardly matters.

“Do you fantasize about killing me?” Hannibal had wondered.

“Yes.”

“Tell me. How would you do it?”

“With my hands,” Will replies.

It's a little sweet in a way, he thinks as Hannibal's fingers tighten around his neck, that he's going to take his life in the same way Will had told him he would take his.

And then, Hannibal has flipped up the consul and his other hand is suddenly tugging down the fly of his pants and pulling his out his cock and Will bucks up into his palm with a gasp, barely able to breathe through his excitement.

“Is this what you want?” Hannibal asks quietly, wrapping his fist tightly around the base to prevent him from coming too soon.

“*Yes*,” Will grunts, blissed out as he feels his windpipe compressed under the strength of the other man's grip.

Leaning over the driver seat with his left hand on Will's throat and his right on his cock means their faces are close enough for them to almost kiss-- *and there is something romantic to the thought of dying on the breath of a last kiss.*

But, although he's a little light headed from his slightly limited access to air, it only serves to further fuel the buzzing high of his arousal and regardless of whether Hannibal decides to strangle him or snap his neck, he's going to need both hands to do it.

“*Nnnngh, please, Hannibal*” Will begs, his legs quaking as he watches Hannibal gather the precum from his slit with his thumb before dragging his fist down his shaft to slick him up for better traction.

“Tell me what you want,” Hannibal asks, keeping the pace of his strokes infuriatingly even until receiving further instruction.

““*Please*-” Will keens, as Hannibal teases him, quickening his rhythm.

“What do you want, Will?”

“*Please*-” he whimpers, pushing his hand over Hannibal's on his crotch. “*You need, you need to*-”

Hannibal's slightly confused expression implies he's not quite on the same page.

“You- you need *both hands*,” he gasps, spelling it out for him.

“Both hands?” Hannibal parrots back, bewildered,

“My neck, around my throat-- you got to- *I want*-”

“*Ah*,” is the only reply he gets back as Hannibal almost angrily shoves away Will's hand and before he can protest, it's too late. A few strokes more is all it takes and he's coming hard enough to see stars. When his head stops spinning, he sees that not only has Hannibal cleaned him up and neatly tucked him back in to his pants, but he's leaning back in his seat with hands loose on the steering wheel, staring blankly out the window ahead of him.

Will wonders if he's had second thoughts. “I thought you'd just get it over with,” he says finally, feeling perplexed and strangely disappointed.

“I know,” Hannibal remarks back enigmatically, still staring out the window.

“What changed your mind?”

“Nothing,” he replies flatly. “My mind is unchanged.”

So he's gearing up then—maybe getting himself in the right frame of mind?

“Well, you know, take your time,” Will snorts softly shaking his head. “No need to rush on my account.”

Hannibal's expression it utterly blank. “No last words?” he asks, finally.

Will shrugs. “Not a lot left to say.” He's not going to mention the whole 'dying with a last kiss' idea. He can sense by the tense tone between them that that might be crossing the line.

“Tell me something, Will.”

“Alright,” he agrees hesitantly.

“Did you think that after I saved your life, that it was still your own?”

The question makes him uncomfortable, but he knows the right answer. “No,” he replies slowly.

After another long silence, Hannibal finally turns to look at him, his eyes gleaming darkly. “From that moment you pulled us over the cliff, Will, you surrendered that right. You tried to take your life and it was yours to take, but when you tried to take mine, you forfeited your claim on your own.”

Will can't exactly argue that.

“However, that which belongs to me, I too, belong to,” Hannibal explains. “We bear a heavy burden, and we are both prone to err. I regret what I've done has caused you undue suffering. I suffered alongside you.”

“Was your revenge satisfactory justice? You knew. You wouldn't let me say it-- you wouldn't talk to me about it-- but you felt my remorse,” Will finally bursts out. “You knew I grieved and you-- you would not relent.”

“It would have been more merciful to end your life,” Hannibal agrees solemnly. “The option was considered, and it would've been within my right, but I'm selfish. I wanted to keep you.”

“But you haven't reconsidered?” Will insists, just to confirm it.

Hannibal smirks. “In a near comedy of errors, I noticed you'd thought so. Your callous disregard for your own life-- which I remind you I hold the claim to, quite frankly, disturbs

me. You were rather blithe about it too. So much so, that in a moment of spite, I may nearly have considered giving you your way."

Will is quiet for a thoughtful minute. "That may be something you come to regret holding back on," he points out. "I think Douglas said it right, 'No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck'."

Hannibal stares at him askance.

"Houdini has nothing on me," Will shrugs flippantly. "I could disappear in a heartbeat.."

"I would find you," Hannibal promises ominously.

"When one is no longer afraid to 'go gentle into that good night', one finds a certain... peace in the consequences."

"You are so very reckless," Hannibal coolly notes. "Fury has so little self-control and yet how you tempt her."

"It would take years for me just to find one fuck to give," Will counters. "Since it appears I'm not going to wind up fertilizer scattered across the corn field tonight, we're at an impasse, aren't we?"

"How so?"

"Can't live with you, can't live without you."

"I applaud the volte-face. You may list your terms," Hannibal folds.

"I'm not going to beg you to give me anything free of charge. Trust takes time to build. I get that, but I'm sick of being treated like a leper, and I miss--" Will huffs a sigh. "I miss you."

Forgiveness is easy, it's the trust that needs rebuilding.

They work on it bit-by-bit in the weeks that follow. Still, although their relationship is on the mend, Will is reluctant to instigate anything and Hannibal gives very little indication he intends to either.

There were moments: too tense, protracted silences with steadily held eye-contact heavy with too many words unspoken, brief exchanges of coy glances, extended lengths of modest physical contact-- a hand on an arm or a shoulder or a possibly accidental brush of a knee against his own-- and then it started mounting: there would be compliment in passing, a drop of an endearment, a very domestic little wardrobe fix, a straightened collar, a smoothed down wrinkle, an adjustment of an out of place hair, and every small touch and word of their renewed proximity was beginning to drive Will up the wall. After too many cold morning showers and less than satisfying, mandatory jerk-offs over the toilet bowl right before joining Hannibal under the sheets every night, he wondered if he might be the first to snap.

He had almost hit the boiling point when Hannibal at last approached the topic and then, the man was so startlingly succinct and earnest and he'd caught Will so unprepared, all he could

do was stumble along inelegantly after him.

Throughout all his life, at least, throughout all of his *adult* life that doesn't include the awkward fumblings of his teenaged-years, he's usually been a pretty confident lover. It's not that he's an expert, but when it comes to his lover's needs, having an extra dose of empathy serves as a rather convenient tool.

By the time they finally tumbled together, they'd both been so pent up for so long over the drawn out weeks—even *years* of sexual and emotional longing and frustration, desperation and exhaustion won out and it was over too soon. The whole act was too fast and a little clumsy, but the overall effect was *exquisite*. Then, afterward, in the midst of the afterglow, Hannibal had unlocked his doors and Will had tumbled down the rabbit hole and suddenly, immersed in the formidable depths of everything his lover felt for him in conjunction with everything he felt for his lover in return, he knew for certain, this was it.

They had waltzed together for years in the strangest of dances. In a courtship of corpses, mind tricks and manipulation, exchanging one betrayal after the next and it had all led to this moment. Whatever this was, forged in fire and brimstone, the cast was set. There was no going back.

There is no going back.

With his immigration papers turned in, temporary visa in hand and rudimentary competence in the Spanish language, he manages to arrange his passage through the city.

Along the way to his lodgings, Will watches out the window throughout the cab ride in silent awe, observing almost an entire gift-shop's collection of post-card worthy scenery.

At night, everything sparkles alive, exciting and radiant. Along the coast of the delta, the culturally rich, thriving hub of Buenos Aires hugs it's harbor, lined by miles of towering skyscrapers and packed streets brimming with sumptuous hotels, exclusive boutiques, museums, chic cafes, bars and bumping nightclubs.

Eventually, the vibrant, neon-lights of the city graduate into the gently illuminated avenues of the affluent Recoleta suburbs. As Will looks out at the breathtaking architecture of historical monuments, majestic cathedrals and their ancient cemeteries surrounded by elegant neighborhoods of luxurious villas and grand estates, he feels like he's just entered upon a fairy tale. The stylish residents roaming the sidewalks of the fashionable uptown district remind him a little intimidatingly of movie stars and models and socialites; laughing and smiling as they swing in and out of classy little clubs and restaurants. It's an atmosphere befitting someone of Hannibal's sophistication; he'd be right at home, and Will thinks he would be too if he were here, but without him, alone and out of his element, he feels a stab of homesick longing for the sleepy fields and forests he's left behind.

Finally, after he arrives at his hotel, trying to suppress his anxiety, Will flips into autopilot and begins the process of settling in. After stripping out of his shirt, he dumps out his belongings onto the bed grabs what he needs and goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

After rinsing out his mouth, Will examines himself in the mirror, less than impressed with what he sees looking back at him. Pulling his fingers through his unruly mop of curls long past overdue for a cut while angling up his chin to inspect the uneven patches of bristles growing back in from this morning's hasty, emergency shaving job, he firmly decides he looks a little like something the cat dragged in. With a resigned sigh, he resolves that if he ever has any intention of venturing back out into public he better clean himself up, glad he at least had the foresight to pick up a grooming kit from the shop downstairs first.

Removing the shaving cream from the case, he sprays out a good-sized dollop into the center of his palm and applies a thick layer over his jaw. After he's finished ridding himself of his stubble, he cleans off the residue and pats on his aftershave, hissing a little at the initial burn. Then, after dragging a wet comb through his hair, Will attaches the guard to his trimmer and goes to work on the overgrown fringe hanging over his eyes and around his ears. Limited by his own reach, he does what he can about the back and when he's finally satisfied he's done all he could, he checks himself over again in the mirror.

Just as being alone for years had taught him self-reliance, growing up poor had taught him self-sufficiency, and thus having had a good deal of practice being his own barber, the end result is passable-- decent even, Will thinks, admiring his own handiwork

Stroking his fingers through his hair to loosen the dampened curls, he auditions a small, inviting smile at himself in the mirror, for a second imagining Hannibal leaning against the doorway watching him. Blushing a little, he pictures averting his eyes, pretending he doesn't care whether he's there or not-- but he does, and it's driving him crazy.

He imagines catching a glimpse of Hannibal's approving gaze lingering over him in the reflection. He's secretly pleased, eating up the attention, reveling being the object of such focused desire. Squirming with arousal he sucks in a long, shaky breath and shuts his eyes, vividly imagining Hannibal's intense, tightly-coiled posture; his expression of barely controlled lust just a hair's stroke away from snapping.

God, to be wanted like that, Will breathes.

Surrendering to the fantasy, he imagines the way Hannibal would be so drawn to him that finally, he'd be unable to resist for even a second more-- sagging forward against the counter, Will's knees go weak as he envisions the way Hannibal would stride in, enclosing his arms tightly around him from behind.

He hears himself moan, shivering with lust as he can practically feel his lover's hot lips kiss the back of his neck, nibbling just below his ear in *just that right spot to make him whimper* as he slides his hands teasingly down along Will's stomach, stopping just above where Will wants him the most--

Palming himself through the fabric of his pants, he gives himself a few more seconds to savor the image before bringing himself back to task. After adjusting himself, Will shucks off his slacks and looks down at his straining erection tucked inside the waistband of his briefs against his belly.

He could deal with it he supposes, but then, there's something delicious about denying himself in anticipation for his lover and anyway, he's got a rather unfortunate coffee stain on the lap of his slacks to deal with first. After searching through the basket of complimentary toiletries, Will runs the fabric under the tap, lathering it up with a bar of soap before scrubbing at it with a washcloth until it's sufficiently vanished. Then, after changing into his jeans and a t-shirt, he slings the damp pants over his arm, retrieves his cellphone and goes out onto the balcony to lay them over a chair to dry.

The hot air is tempered by a gentle breeze blowing off the coast and Will leans against the railing, reveling in the exotic smell of the subtropic climate. The scent is earthy and floral and green, and beneath it there is a hint of the ocean and the smoke of char-grilling steaks and cooking food from the nearby restaurants.

Hannibal would love it here, he thinks, gripped by an ache of loneliness as he imagines his companion joining him by his side with a glass of *rose*, gazing down with him over the lush, sprawling gardens.

Glancing at his phone, Will sees there are still no messages from him. He hopes that's a good thing.

He takes in, ordering up to his room. He eats outside, watching the other hotel guests sunbathing by the pool and strolling down through the winding paths of the terraced groves. When he's finished, Will kicks off his jeans and flops down onto the bed. Flipping through the television stations, he fiddles with captions button searching for english subtitles as he tucks into his sandwich. When he's finished, he discards the plates to the nightstand, turns over, pulls up his sheets and drifts off to the drone of the weather channel.

He dreams of a twenty percent chance of rain, mostly clear skies and cool evening down by the pier with Hannibal's arm looped lazily around his shoulders as they watch the sailboats on the horizon.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

I know it's been weeks since my last post, but between family, a jaunt to Jamaica with onawingandaswear and a terrible bout of writer's block, I did my best. This chapter comes with a warning: DUBIOUS CONSENT. If you're not okay with that, then I sort of wonder how you can survive in this fandom. Do you read fluff all day? The only fluff I come in contact with is on my lint brush and the backs of my ridiculous menagerie.

btw, I'm sorry about any misused Catholic jargon, for some reason it seemed really necessary to use a lot of it in this chapter.

Side note:
Ancient Greeks were some crazy fuckers.

Working off a painfully surfeited deficit of several stressful, long and draining days, for once, Will sleeps soundly.

His dreams, when they come, are vast and varied; the interludes bursting from intervals of oblivion in an engaging spectacle of contrasts. Bewitched, Will succumbs, surrendering wholly to the immersive, protean milieu, and although lucidity beckons on the fringes, it's gossamer tendrils dancing just out of reach, the chase evinces as much futility as a blind, starving shark amidst an agitated nest of tiny minnows darting away from his gnashing maw.

Then, while conducted down a vivid, surreal and unwieldy detour through the labyrinthine network of his mind, he chances across a purpose and latches onto with single-minded fervor. There is a mercurial sort of ambiguity to his cause, but never once does this deter his determination.

Even if he can't see them, the shark can feel the fish bump against his nose. With certainty comes authenticity, which by extension, affords integrity; meriting the hunt.

There are no nightmares to jump out from in a cold sweat-- no poignant reckoning of terrors lived or fathomed to taunt him. The demons are kept at bay; the morasses left stagnant. There is no sudden, jarring noise nor physical disturbance. There is no discomfort: no urgency in his bladder, no cramp in his thigh. The temperature is ambient. His covers are in order and his pillow is in the same place beneath his head. There is only the persistent, inexplicable tingling of anticipation.

Instantly awake and momentarily disoriented, Will bolts upright. Hands planted flat on the bed, he leans forward, glancing anxiously around the room. Shrouded in the dark, he's slightly able to discern the dark shapes of the dresser and the television across from him. To one side, beneath the window he can see where his bags are propped on the chair next to the coffee table. Recognizing the familiar appointments, he blows out a breath of relief, quickly recovering his bearings with the adjusted alacrity exigent to the fugitive. The passing thought pulls from Will a fleeting, derisive smile: there is definitely a certain resemblance.

The humor withers from his expression curdling into a wary, suspicious scowl. *Why is he awake?* There's no overt, external reason aside from the acute, needling feeling he can't seem to quell still pricking at him, warning him of something imminent.

He could chalk it up to his internal alarm-clock, but if the sheerness of the drapes serves as any indication, he can tell it's still pitch black out.

Rolling over to his side, Will fumbles for his glasses on the nightstand. Once they're in place, he squints at the actual clock, the time confirming it's still well before dawn. This should exclude at least one potential culprit, but the hard fact is, he can't put any stock in something that's never been in working order in the first place. His circadian rhythm has always been unreliable; just another dysfunction on the long list of his many deficiencies-- tools of the common too long lain derelict to salvage. But, then, why salvage what's superfluous? Weakness in one sense is compensated for in the strength of another. The shark may not see his tiny, scattering prey but he can feel their vibrations in the water.

Still, Will's keen sense of intuition provides no service nor serves much comfort without the support of empirical data. He's stumped. He can't identify it. He can't see, smell, touch or taste an explanation, but he feels the ineffable nudge: a full body sensation of tiny pin pricks washing over him in waves; the current pullulating the longer he dwells on it like the lunar-waxing tide rolling into shore. The focus however, is out of focus, but it's as chafing as a particularly crimped wrinkle in the fabric of an otherwise smooth cloth.

Somehow, he feels linked to it, tethered by an invisible connection and the the closer it comes, the tauter the cords draws. Closing his eyes, he focuses himself, mentally envisioning the line. The second he makes contact, it's as if he's accidentally touched the exposed end of a shorting wire. Will jolts back from the shock and for a long moment after, he can almost smell the hot singe of burnt air; the fresh char of seared flesh and hear the deafening pop of the ephemeral surge still echoing in his head, ebbing gradually into a distant buzz: the snap and crackling inside his atoms as the charge changes him-- *primes* him.

Will perks to attention as he hears the distant approach of footsteps coming up the hall and sucks in a breath, tensing as they come to a stop on the other side of his door. His heart lurches into his throat at the slip of a keycard sliding through the slot and as the handle is turned he springs into action, disentangling himself from his sheets while grabbing his knife from beneath his pillow.

After rolling quickly off the side of the bed, he flattens his back stealthily against the entryway wall just as the latch of the door clicks shut. For a moment, it’s quiet enough to hear a pin drop but Will feels the intruder’s presence; knows they’re both holding their breath, listening for each other, assessing their opponent, gauging the potential level of threat.

Will chokes up his grip on his knife, his molars grinding in anticipation.

“You're awake,” the stranger observes, his tone even and unsurprised.

Will freezes.

“I was holding out hope for a more congenial reunion but I won't hesitate to disarm you if you won't unhand your weapon of your own volition.”

Will's fingers cramp as they clench the handle, his pulse a deafening roar in his ears.

“It's an intriguing smell; the scent of the warrior at his guard; the corrosive stench of his fear and the pungent, brackish acidity of his sweat,” the other man muses. “The violence in his veins. The intoxicating overlay of adrenaline mingling with the cold forged iron of his blood; the sharp bite of his steel blade clenched tightly in the wet palm of his fist.”

Will gasps in recognition.

“The fear tarnishes the brilliance, but it isn't fear I smell on you, Will. No, it's not fear. It's *thirst*. Yearning has it's own brand of piquancy. Yours is provocative. Like the ghosts of Sardis, it brings to mind the crackling cinders of bone burnt to ash beneath the bricks of their fallen citadel.”

Will swallows thickly, finding it increasingly difficult to suppress his excitement.

“In you, there is a certain exotic... *specificity* to your signature. A tempered, glorious savagery, a barbarous spark I can nearly *taste*,” Hannibal purrs.

“What does it taste like?” Will asks, enraptured and breathless, barely able to contain himself as Hannibal's low, seductive timbre connects to him from the other side of the wall, practically resonating with his own electricity.

“*Volcanic*,” he replies, his dulcet tone sending shivers down Will's spine. “Molten earth and fire chased by a heady brute of vigor.”

Will groans, sinking down to his knees as the penetrating, velvet sound of Hannibal's voice rolls over him.

“With all the exquisite heat and breathtaking gravity of a collapsing star; your triumph is legion's manifold, your coronation performed by God himself. The divine right of your reign, yours ad infinitum.”

“A bare king is a vulnerable one,” Will points out.

“Not historically,” Hannibal replies shrewdly. “In the oldest form of chess, the persian game of shatranj, a bared king was a desired method of winning. However, in the exception where immediately after one is bared, come next turn they are able to retaliate and bare their opponent, the situation is considered a draw-- a *Medinese victory*.”

“A draw seems a fairer end to war.”

Hannibal hedges his response carefully. “It's often been said it's lonesome at the top.”

Will shrugs, ceding the point. “Lonesome enough one may be tempted to solicit an alliance. Share the burden of rule.”

“It would be a compelling offer,” Hannibal returns.

Will holds his breath. “One you couldn't refuse?”

“Am I under consideration?”

“Well, as a contender to the throne, there would be certain prerequisite concessions,” Will cautions.

“You've already conquered me,” Hannibal confesses, the hoarse crack on the admission betraying his lost composure. “Toppled all my kingdoms, stripped away my armor and fleeced what was left. You are my ruin and my salvation, Will, what more can I give?”

The shark scents his prey and chomps.

“Your obedience. Your honesty— *no loopholes*.”

“If I concede to such terms, then I expect the same,” Hannibal returns without deliberation.

Will is pleased by the counter-proposal. “Then we have an accord.”

“Do we?”

Will drops his knife on the nightstand. “Hand's free to shake on it.”

“While that's certainly a relief in of itself, in the interest of full disclosure, I feel compelled to inform you that I was enroute with loftier ambitions than to burn the midnight oil loitering in doorways.”

“I appreciate your candor,” Will remarks solemnly through an amused grin, squinting against the light suddenly flooding the room.

“Is that an invitation to the bed booked under my credit card?” Hannibal inquires airily, ambling in, coat draped jauntily over his shoulder and suitcase in hand.

“Penurious,” Will exclaims, remaining put while his eyes rove over the welcome form of his companion.

“*Destitute*,” Hannibal returns dryly, setting his belongings a top the dresser.

“I see you've glanced at your receipts.”

“I've tallied up enough numbers to lay claim to certain pieces of furniture,” Hannibal replies lightly.

Will pretends a sullen sniff. “Well, I suppose the floor will do.”

“The floor will do as a good prop for the bed I intend to join you in,” Hannibal retorts turning back toward him with an almost preening grin. Momentarily disarmed by his cocksure expression in juxtaposition with his unusually relaxed appearance, Will doesn't have an immediate retort prepared at the gate.

Lost cause that it is, he completes the assessment, Hannibal indulgently watching him with a glint of bemused patience.

What catches Will most off guard is the particular nature of his incredibly informal attire. He's seen the other man in prison uniform and seen him in tatters covered in blood. *Hell,* he's seen him stark naked, but *this* he's never seen, and of course, he's seen him dressed down before, but even his casual-wear is fairly beholden to a more elevated level of sophistication, but, the way he carries *bespoke-vacation* renders Will nearly slack-jawed with admiration.

The fitted polo open at the neck, the jeans—*so obviously designer*— even an untrained eye could easily confirm as much, the light suede loafers *without socks*, Will notes in amusement, sucking in a breath as his gaze wonders back up to marvel at the rest; the slightly disheveled hair-- the loose fringe hanging over his forehead, the product loosed from travel in a fashionably defiant, devil-may-care way that makes Will's fingers twitch with a desire to run his fingers through. The entire ensemble sheds years from his age. But then, reconsidering his analysis, the several days growth of untended stubble shaves off at least a decade. Will doesn't know how this is possible-- *or fair,* for that matter. He was handsome before, but now, he's utterly enticing and very suddenly, Will is acutely aware of his own lack of clothing and his very likely, incredibly obvious appreciation.

“May I interpret your response-- or at least verbal lack of, to mean you accept my proposal?” Hannibal finally asks, interrupting his reverie with an observant, good-humored flash of a smile.

Caught red-handed, Will flushes, blinking back at the other man dumbly. “What?”

“I'm unsure what level of brevity is further required,” Hannibal muses, sauntering forward with a small, licentious smirk. “I am courteously asking if you're amenable to returning to our former sleeping arrangements.”

“Our former '*sleeping'* arrangements?” Will asks, quickly catching on, but holding his ground.

“Would you be open to sharing a portion of the bed?”

Will matches Hannibal's expression, reflecting back his playful grin as his companion's hands slip around his hips, inserting his thumbs beneath the flimsy waistband of his boxers.

“As much as I enjoy the particularly refreshing modification to your apparel, I think you may still be a little overdressed for the occasion.”

Hannibal pulls Will flush against himself. “An oversight that can be easily remedied,” he replies easily, dipping his chin down an inch to brush together their lips.

“You're making it very difficult for me to be angry with you.”

“If I'd been truly successful in the endeavor, you would already be kissing me back.”

Will licks his lips, his eyes shuttering as Hannibal's lips caress the underside of his jawline.

“Already be kissing you? That infers I have some intention to in the first place,” Will counters teasingly, biting back a moan as his companion's teeth graze over his adam's apple. “Presumptuous.”

“I believe the actual word you're searching for is 'confident',” Hannibal replies confidently, capturing his mouth to proclaim his point.

Supine against the wall at the mercy of the other man's ministrations and overwhelmingly aroused, Will surrenders, but it feels nothing like defeat.

Hannibal breaks away leaving him breathless. “If we're to proceed further, a shower may be in order,” he recommends, canting his hips forward against Will's suggestively.

“I know a way or two to shed a layer of sweat,” Will counters, not as willing to so swiftly lose the immediate gratification of his partner's talented tongue.

“Perhaps you would allow me to demonstrate a more hygienic solution that may still prove to satisfy,” Hannibal smirks against his lips before pulling away to strip off his shirt.

Unable to resist his suddenly bared skin, Will's hands remand purchase on the goods, smoothing down Hannibal's firm chest before wrapping both arms around his back, locking him in place. “Perhaps, I enjoy a little filth from my lover,” he remarks, leaning in to prove it, licking one, broad stroke just around the circumference of his nipple. Hannibal takes in a shaky breath, his nostril's flaring as he's sampled, watching Will through shuttered, translucent lashes as he repeats the demonstration over the pale nub.

“And how does your hypothesis measure now?” he asks, tenderly stroking his fingers along the side of Will's face.

“More appealing than appalling,” Will replies. “A bit saltier than expected but overall decent seasoning.”

“Your phrasing isn't subtle,” Hannibal smirks.

“Well, I have always aspired to possess your exemplary bedside manner,” Will shrugs before sucking the nipple into his mouth. Instead of the rejoinder Will had expected, Hannibal releases a weak whimper in it's place, and he can tell instantly by his soft cringe it had slipped out completely unbidden. Congratulating himself, Will tortures it out the rest of the way, dropping to his knees to explore the inner parts of his navel. Hannibal's hands twist in his hair, tugging sharply at the same time he shudders out an audible moan, wracked simultaneously with equal parts pleasure and disapproval.

Curious, Will glances up to gauge the other man's response. The expression he observes is tight; over-flood with a disproportionate amount of disbelief that takes him a little aback.

“You're on your knees,” Hannibal states, breath hitched.

“Astute,” Will snorts softly, unzipping his partner's pants before pulling open the fly. Trapped beneath the thin layer of his briefs, his arousal throbs a little as he examines it and Will can't exactly determine whether he turned on, intimidated or terrified. All three seem about accurate and he's a little fascinated as well by Hannibal's reaction. As he nuzzles lightly against the swollen head, he decides his experiment was worth the effort. The strangled, unintentional moan he receives alone is bolstering.

Burying his face deeper into his groin, he inhales the thick, masculine scent. There's a couple days unwashed addition of musk not dissimilar from his own and he's pleased to discover he doesn't find it the least bit off-putting.

When Hannibal still neither moves nor speaks, Will glances back up, meeting scarlet eyes watching him, moved with deep, unidentifiable emotion.

“Statues are for museums,” he grins in good humor to break the burgeoning tension. “Or garden water fountains. Depends on your preference I suspect.”

Hannibal's eyes don't soften, but the hard line of his mouth curls into a small smile that lessens the effect of overall severity. “You tempt me to sin,” he whispers, looking down upon Will with a glint of something that approaches too dark and borderline dangerous.

There's the predator, Will thinks, a thrill of terror escalating the intensity of his lust.

“That so happens to be the objective,” he replies with a chipper confidence he doesn't feel. He's exhilarated by the precarious teeter-tottering exchange of power but his inexperience in this particular arena combined with Hannibal's peculiar reserve and self-restraint doesn't serve to ease him.

“Your flippancy proves you've no concept of your actions,” Hannibal chastises, his tone as firm as the grave look in his eyes.

Will yanks the stubborn bastard's pants to just below his knees and grabs him with bruising force by his hips. “It's not as if I'm following a guidebook or anything, but I do have some idea how this is done.”

“You clearly misunderstand,” Hannibal grunts.

“Then enlighten me,” Will orders, mouthing the man's cock, dampening the dark gray fabric until it's saturated black with his saliva. Pulling back just enough to admire his work, he recognizes the spreading wet stain across the swollen head, slick with the man's own precum. His words demur but his body speaks the truth, Will concludes, victorious in the face of solid proof.

“You don't belong on the ground,” Hannibal utters between ravaged breaths, the stilted tone of his complaint existing in disharmony with his expression of undone bliss.

“I belong where I put myself,” he retorts in frustration, angrily maneuvering Hannibal against the wall. He stays put, sagging against it as Will presses his face into his groin, hiding his embarrassment over the hasty, unintentionally self-degrading remark while serving to hold up the appearance of remaining fastened to his course of action.

Hannibal's fist yanks his curls, drawing his attention back up. “You don't belong on the ground,” he repeats, in a stern, low growl, his eyes boring holes into Will. “You don't belong on your knees before me. You are not the supplicant before the altar, the disciple in slavish worship to his Lord.”

“You have a seriously skewed perception of foreplay if you think this is some kind of payment of tribute,” Will argues, slipping the briefs easily down his lover's thighs. He doesn't try to stop him.

Hannibal's cock springs up, painfully hard and dripping. “In any other circumstance, between any other two individuals you wouldn't be mistaken,” He groans in soft agony as Will wraps his fingers around him, slipping the sheath down from over the top of the head before positioning himself between his lover's knees in a more conducive angle for what he intends. Hannibal crumples a little, sagging against the wall at the first, testing touch of Will's tongue along the side of his cock. Collecting a small dribble of his lover's emissions, he pulls away a few inches and closes his lips around the flavor. Pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth he exhales slowly through his nose to discern to taste.

There's the slightest, unoffensive sweetness to the almost translucent fluid, he discovers.

“This, what you're doing, Will,” Hannibal continues, “Is sacrilege.”

“Thankfully, I give little credence to dogma,” Will bites out, bristling with antipathy for the other man's unrelenting bout of irrationality. He's partially aware Hannibal's increasingly repetitious, gratingly self-righteous rebuttals, though not only pointless, but demeaning as well, should be more effective agents of dissuasion, yet for some reason, though the rosy mood is miles past spoiled, the more the man airs his grievances and the angrier it makes Will, the hotter the passion boils in his veins. Watching the other man dissolve into ecstasy at his behest is a two birds, one stone mix of glorious retribution and dominance in the headiest of combinations.

“This is a desecration,” Hannibal mutters softly, gazing down at Will with something between adoration and contempt. “I will make you repent for this.”

Will darts a glance up at the other man as he licks his way down his shaft and back up again, tonguing beneath the ridge of his head before laving over the slit to gather another bead about to spill over.

“I'll hold you to that promise,” he replies evenly, smearing a lubricating coating of his spit and Hannibal's precum down the length of the man's cock.

“You realize you're acting without my consent,” Hannibal points out, staring down at him with dispraising consideration.

Will leisurely jerks him off in one fist meeting his expression with an unimpressed look of his own.

“You could tell me to stop. You could push me away. You could easily overpower me if it came down to it,” he sighs. “Any time now, you could end this.”

Will waits for the command that never comes, and tightens his grip. “I'm doing this for you.” *'Let me do this for you,'* he pleads silently.

“You don't need my permission,” Hannibal reassures him calmly. “But did it never cross your mind you should have given either of us your own?”

Rocking back on his knees, Will slows the pace of his hand to curb the steadily mounting finale. Hannibal's almost devastated groan in response feeds straight to his own neglected erection.

“I've taken it for both of us.”

“Theft of sacrament is contradiction. It makes the effort trivial. Unholy,”

“Your personal ideologies beg to differ,” Will retorts.

Hannibal stares down at him through hazed, shuttered eyes. “When you were young, Will, did you not ever ponder over the butterfly with the broken wing caught in your net and give a moment's pause to mourn the sabotage of such fragile beauty?”

A twinge of guilt catches then, tightening into a knot in his chest.

“There is nothing here that cannot be undone, but consider the balance between us. The tip of the weights on the scale. Project, Will,” he instructs. “See objectively the symbolism. Trampled rose beds do not regrow the following spring. You are changing the weights, tipping the scale in my favor.”

“Temporarily,” Will objects. “Return the favor and we'll call it a draw. A 'Medinese Victory'.”

Hannibal loosely accepts the suggestion without further word and after a long minute of silence, Will glances back at the man, noting with anxiety his wooden expression; his erratic breathing the only tell-tale sign he's enjoying any pleasure, but he can tell it's physical alone. In the man's eyes is a spiritually vacant look of closed-off resignation transforming what should be a pleasurable act for both of them into something mechanical.

Feeling abandoned and self-conscious, Will gives up and stops. Hannibal raises his eyebrows and glances down at him curiously.

“What do you want me to do?” Will asks.

Hannibal smiles at him soothingly. “I want you to lay on the bed,” he whispers slowly as if speaking to him through a dream. “You will prepare yourself for me,” he continues, lovingly combing his fingers through Will's hair with one hand while gripping the base of his cock with his other to stave off the pleasure of his personal victory.

Will shivers at the sensation of his lover's fingernails scraping lightly against his scalp and the coolly controlled malice in his gaze.

“I will remind you of your place and you will never dare forget it again. You will thank me for my mercy and I will forgive you. You will turn over, face down,” Hannibal orders him calmly. “And then, Will, I will take you.”

Offering Will his hand is only to aid him up and not a conciliatory act. Coaxing him forward like an unsteady foal, he gathers Will into his arms and places a chaste kiss on his forehead. This act is deliberately debasing. Will sees himself reflected in the other man's eyes: he sees the monster he's made there. The glaring mistake placidly looking back at him. He is the lowly sycophant who by some naive crime has promoted his equal to the elevated status of his master.

He must give unto him the ripened fig, the symbol of his attrition.

Following the other man's instruction, Will climbs atop the bed and lays prostrate before him. Occluding his mind, he finds a safe place to pocket his sanity until the ritual cleansing of his crime is complete.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life's greatest feat is owed to its ancestral inheritance: its intrepid will to survive; to overcome or adapt to it's environs in the face of peril. A porcupine rears it's spines, the deer darts off into the dense camouflage of the meadow.

However, as hard as the shell is on the armadillo's back, its shield serves no protection as it lumbers blindly across the freeway. Will's intent to tuck inward, to duck under the shield; to mute his misgivings and convey some semblance of docile quiescence does not subsist with much endurance. The piercing scrutiny of Hannibal's shrewd gaze makes quick roadkill of the attempt with little effort.

Emotional stowaways are slippery that way, the lot of them tenebrous renegades, and in the end, they show little regard for self-preservation. It's not easy to mute the roaring barrage of incensed dissent rearing it's ugly head.

After all, forfeiture is easier said than done.

Will fluently grasps the allegory he's inadvertently nudged into fruition. The assignations designate themselves: he is the derivative equivalent of *the prodigal son;* the penitent-- in all the self-effacing humility of sycophantic obeisance, bowed by sin, cowering before the adjudicant. Hannibal dons the mantle of the latter with stern, over-zealous probity; his verdict unfaltering and inexorable. The father rejoices his son's return but is stayed by pious determination: he will embrace him wholly once his sins are absolved.

Will is willing to accept ownership of any damages incurred, but what's expected in reparation ill fits the crime. He is meant to submit, surrendering all autonomy; his body, the physical effigy servicing as the spiritual sacrifice. This is not retaliation. This is not sex. This is not even a grotesque parody of the act. This is a mission, and in a skewed way, the logic is sound: symmetrical restoration of the oft skewed Diarchy by reclamation-- it makes sense.

“I will remind you of your place and you will never forget it again.” It begs the question: What precisely is that place?

For an archetype classicist so heavily immersed in the world of antiquity, its not unlikely the traditional model of the carnal dichotomy would be deeply steeped in the psyche. It's reasonable to assume that over time, with consistent subliminal exposure would come inevitable, if inadvertent conditioning. Creeping out from the hidden depths of his subconscious; the hedonist, the aesthete eschewing so many other trappings of convention, would find himself compelled by the transposition. Through its distorted lens he would be stunted to the narrow dynamic of Priapus and Hestia. Of course, paying credence to the roles they embody would extend into the intimate activities of the bedroom where it would be quite natural to attach their expected connotations.

To be so blindly consumed with that kind of unconscious prejudice is terribly limiting and Will wonders if it's possible to reset. Reconditioning is a challenging endeavor, but not one he isn't willing to attempt if the opportunity arises and he's broken dogs far worse for the wear. The trick is to find what motivates the behavior—then, find a more conducive incentive to catalyze change.

Taking his own advice, he analyzes the situation from Hannibal's perspective: one on their knees in service to another could likely be construed as self-demoting. However, on the flip side of that coin, there is an empowering sense of control one wields over the recipient in such a position.

He's not anywhere near as obsessively focused with the delicate balance of the scale, having lost tally on it's tip miles ago, thus, he's not exactly clear which side he's upset, but judging by Hannibal's intent to dominate him, there is the heavy implication that he's not keen on being at Will's mercy.

Maybe he means to even the score. However, there is also every indication to the contrary. Although the man's visible reaction to his efforts was encouraging, his visceral response was far from. Inundated by a rippling current of cringing discomfort rolling off of him in waves, Will couldn't help but feel a vicarious sense of dysmorphia. And, from somewhere underneath all of Hannibal's self-righteous affrontery and sanctimonious tyrannism, he couldn't help catching a glint of dispossessed vulnerability straggling in the periphery.

"*You don't belong on your knees,"* he'd repeated so often it's imprinted on the insides of Will's skull. If he were to draw an objective conclusion from everything he's been able to glean, he would attribute the man's obvious distress to the acutely felt dissatisfaction of resentment. He wasn't disturbed by Will's stubborn refusal to stop, nor was he frustrated by his inability to stop him—the loss of control was a heady spur.

So heady he practically *shook* with it.

The only thing that would have pleased him more would have been to reverse the favor. Only, in Will's place, it wouldn't be about remanding the reins, it would be about releasing them.

It's perplexing then that the punishment he intends to dish out should be in such contradiction—but then, looking at the man standing before him at the foot of the bed, he decides it might be unwise to pose reason against caprice.

The worst thing about all of this is not his sudden mercurial unpredictability, but that he's intentionally shutting Will out, hiding something from him, and for all they've experienced together, for all his promises, it's like he's dropped them back at square one.

Will wants to throw something at him. Something that will hurt. Maybe the alarm clock or the Gideon's bible in the nightstand drawer.

He's not quite sure what to do but the still hush hovering in the small space between them is stifling; charged with tension. Hannibal doesn't speak a word to break it but instead, stares down his quarry with intimidating, uninterpretable fervency, hands clasped with disciplined expectation in front of him. There is a conspicuous bulge in the front of his pants where he's

tucked himself back away but its otherwise ignored. Behind him, over the desk is a wall clock and Will can almost feel the sticky reluctance of each tick as each second stretches, protracting with intolerable inertia, eroding his resolve.

For a moment, squirming uncomfortably with the terrible suspension, he debates poaching the silence himself, but then, Hannibal gives him a thin smile of approval. “Remain put. I'll return shortly.”

“Not exactly going anywhere,” Will retorts before he can stop himself. Hannibal freezes in the doorway to the bathroom and swivels back around to glare at him.

“You are not to speak,” he chastises curtly. Will grants a small nod, reluctantly acquiescing. This is not what he wants. This is not how they're supposed to be and he knows they both feel it. Still, the other man determinedly maintains his act and Will strives to mirror him.

It's to no effect, however. Hannibal watches him closely for another long moment, his sharp, withering gaze reducing Will to a small fit of fluttering nerves. The dense cluster constricts tightly in his chest, making it hard to breathe—hard to swallow. Will shrinks back a little as the other man's eyes narrow, keen and probing with a coldness that summons to mind the detached austerity of a surgeon examining his patient pre-op.

What are you looking for? What do you want? Will wants to scream—to scratch and bite and claw his way out of this strange, suffocating situation.

“Relax,” Hannibal instructs, finally returning to his task. Will bites at the insides of his cheeks and counts backward from ten but there's no escape.

When Hannibal returns, he holds out a dampened washcloth. After Will accepts it, the other man takes a seat on the furthest corner of the bed, just out of reach.

“Clean yourself.”

Will flushes, grimacing darkly down at the washcloth in his hand but makes no further motion to comply. The mere thought alone of those merciless, penetrating eyes in voyeuristic observation of what should be a private undertaking makes him sick to his stomach. Comprehending the reason for his hesitation, Hannibal's lips press into a thin line of dismay but he nods in acknowledgment, courteously turning his perusal to the opposite wall.

Sucking in a breath, Will slips down his boxers, laying them in a crumpled ball close by his side. Leaning against the headboard and bringing his knees up to his chin, he takes a long look down at himself—the dark thatch of curly hair that runs from his groin downward, tapering off sparsely just before the knobby protrusions of his ankles, the thin creases and folds of his stomach and his flaccid dick scrunched over his balls, the tip still glistening a little from his earlier arousal. It's not the most flattering vantage point, he concedes, but in the grand scheme of things, considering the circumstances; the unexpected, strange turn to the evening, he's amazed he's even wrangled the courage to go through with this. *Well*, in all honesty, he's not entirely sure he had much of a choice in the matter.

Steeling himself, Will dabs the warm cloth against his entrance. The sensation is as soothing as it is bizarre. The most contact he's accustomed to in this area is in the shower and that's an apathetic, perfunctory effort at best. He dabs a few more times before checking the washcloth, the unsoiled surface assuring him he's likely presentable.

Glancing up, he wilts the second he catches Hannibal's eyes on him and wonders if he's been spying the whole time. His expression is outwardly clinical but there is a steady hunger simmering just below the surface that betrays him. Hot embarrassment rushes to Will's ears at the realization and he hides his face in his knees.

Hannibal clears his throat, drawing back up his attention. “Use this liberally,” he recommends, his tone low and calming.

Will lays down the washcloth and apprehensively takes the opened tube, squeezing out a generous dollop onto his fingertip. Hannibal's eyes follow without secrecy this time as he modestly spreads his knees apart just enough to reach down between. Spreading the slick gel around his opening he flinches at the coldness, feeling the muscles pucker in response.

“Insert the tip of your finger,” Hannibal advises. “Move in slowly. Accustom yourself to the feeling of it inside of you.”

Will follows the instruction, awkwardly pushing inward. It's neither unpleasant nor uncomfortable. He doesn't exactly see the appeal, but the idea of his lover's rapt attention on his every move; hearing the hitch of his breath as he adds a second finger stirs a thrill in stomach that races straight down to his groin. His cock wakes with a small twitch, filling a little as their gaze briefly connects.

“If you can, Will, add another.”

He clenches a little around the addition of the second digit, but once he breaches through, there isn't any discomfort. Still, when he adds the third and his muscles suddenly contract, he reflexively pulls out completely. Slightly ashamed of the hasty reaction, his eyes dart up to meet Hannibal's, an apology ready on his lips, but he's beaten to the punch with a soft look of patient reassurance.

“Start over from the beginning,” Hannibal offers, “Try to relax. Slow, even breaths. Allow your body time to familiarize itself.”

This is effecting him. Will can tell by the soft, trembling rumble in his voice and the shake of his hands on his lap, his fingers digging into his thighs, the intensity of the effort put into using every last fiber of his self-restraint. Responsively, Will's cock swells where it's stuck between his thigh and his abdomen.

This time, with the addition of the third finger, as the muscle walls squeeze around him, Will holds himself steady. After weathering through another tight clench, he remembers to breathe and slowly he feels himself relax. The fullness is a little foreign but there is something strangely satisfying about it and once he's sure the short waves of small contractions rolling inside of him are to be expected and not a signal he needs to excuse himself to the toilet, he decides he almost likes the feeling.

Just as he's beginning to enjoy the slow, rhythmic push of his fingers in and out of himself, Hannibal's fingers wrap tightly around his wrist, stilling him.

“Enough,” he orders tightly, his eyes shuttered and pupils blown. Glancing down at his lap, Will inhales a sharp breath as he catches Hannibal's hand pressed over the impressive girth of his own arousal stretching taut the denim. “Enough,” he rasps, releasing Will's wrist before rising from the bed.

Will's eyes chase after him, perplexed and impatient. He's right. Enough is enough. “No, Hannibal,” he snaps, wiping his fingers off on the washcloth and pushing himself up to his knees on the bed. “I can put up with a hell of a lot. You go and pitch a fit over a fucking blowjob and I backed off and then you come at me with this performance, which I was obviously willing to humor, but you can't just arbitrarily decide to cut and run. Either you see this through or I will throw you down on this mattress and take you myself.”

Hannibal's wide, surprised eyes blink back at him. “I was about to suggest the idea,” he replies, bemused.

Caught off guard, Will pauses. “What?”

“You've never been with another man, it doesn't make sense for you to be the recipient your first time. It won't be an enjoyable experience for either of us,” Hannibal explains evenly. “Earlier I suggested a shower. You are very welcome to join me.”

Will tries not to scowl. “If that was your aim from the get go, why the games—the perpetual, exhausting tug-of-war? What is this need you have to complicate everything?”

“A poignant question, Will. I could ask you the same.”

“All I asked you for was honesty,” Will points out. “And I would be straightforward with you. Considering our past, I get that's a little tough to expect, but it might be an interesting experiment at the very least.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes guardedly. “Very well, quid pro quo. Truth for a truth,” he offers. “Do you bear toward me any lingering resentment for the several weeks duration following our little incident with the cliff?”

“Wow, trial by fire,” Will breathes. “Shit. Well, I did. For awhile. You acted like I was a walking, talking disease, but, you know, I'm over it. You over the actual 'little incident with the cliff'?

“Are you?”

“I would erase it if I could,” Will admits softly.

“The curve of your lips rewrites history,” Hannibal replies sauntering forward to collect Will's mouth.

Pulling reluctantly away from the kiss, Will settles back down, sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed. “Your turn.”

Taking a seat on the adjacent corner beside him, Hannibal leans over to comb his fingers distractedly through Will's curls, lost in thought. Finally, finding a question, he meets his gaze. “I was the first to introduce a physical element to our relationship. For a long time I was under the impression you were a strict admirer of the opposite sex. I've often wondered if I was an exception to the rule—if I awoke in you the latent flexibility of your inclinations or if you'd nurtured discreet lusts before. When did you first grasp the nature of your attraction to me, Will?”

The hot creep of a blush rises to the surface and Will chuckles uncomfortably. “You're uh, not the first I ever noticed, but definitely the first I actively considered—*wanted*,” he explains. “Oddly enough, I was sitting in the car about to meet Jack to convince him to use you for a lure for the Dragon when I- well, there was an epiphany of sorts.”

Hannibal smiles warmly. “I wanted you from the moment you unloaded every last bullet into Garret Jacob Hobb's chest.”

Will cracks a grin. “*Romantic*.”

“Possibly,” Hannibal shrugs, “You're up next.”

“Why the song and dance?”

Hannibal stares at him confused. “How do you mean?”

“All the equivocating—the alpha posturing. It's pretense. You don't want that.”

Hannibal drops his eyes to his knees with an abashed expression, reticent to answer. Will intuits it for him.

“If I assert some measure of dominance, you yield every time. It's not courtesy. I've raised a good share of dogs and I'm pretty good at picking that kind of thing up. In the past, you know, like in other partners I've had, it's something I've noticed. It's not something I look for or anything—or expect for that matter, but I'm uh, into it,” Will rambles nervously. “You're way more obsessed with the notion of maintaining some kind of power balance, but I don't think it extends into the bedroom.”

“If you would only allow it, I would worship you,” Hannibal confesses, dragging him into his arms and burying his face into the side of his neck. “I told you, Will. You have conquered me completely, both my day and night revolve around wondering how I can keep you. What I can do.”

Will gasps as Hannibal's lips caress just under his jaw. “You know, Will, there is nothing I wouldn't do to keep you,” he whispers, mouth dancing softly against the shell of his ear before dipping inside. A brief swirl of his tongue combined with the hot warmth of his breath render Will boneless and aching with desire. “You consume me as no other ever has or will,” Hannibal tells him, nibbling on the lobe before sucking it into his mouth.

Will whimpers softly as he feels his lover's hand slip between them to wrap around his cock. “I want to make you mine,” he purrs, leisurely pumping Will in his fist, dragging his thumb

slowly over the head past the slit. “But more than anything, I want you to make me your own.”

The declaration ignites a spark in Will's chest that burns away everything that isn't *them.*

“Is that your consent?” he asks through stuttered breaths.

“That's my prayer,” Hannibal edifies.

“Then consider it answered,” Will replies, moving to capture his lover's mouth into the beginning of a kiss that will seal them together until their final breath.

Chapter End Notes

This is your advance notice of a wealth of smut in the next chapter. I mean, all of this is basically NSFW, but I highly recommend reading it in privacy.

Chapter 26

As Hannibal pulls him closer to deepen the kiss; as he wraps his hand possessively around the back of Will's neck and as Will's fingers entangle in his hair, it's almost as if the world spinning on it's axis slows, suspending this exact, very moment. And in this single stretch of time, in this stereoscopic convergence, the two, long estranged halves clamber desperately for reunion. Will can barely breathe for it's intensity and when finally they pull apart, the newly soldered fuse smolders hot between them.

Hannibal's eyes fix to his, sparkling with soft adoration. “I never expected you,” he muses, wonderingly. He doesn't have to explain what he means. Will understands fluently.

It's both terrifying and exhilarating how whole he feels in this moment; so full, his chest aches with it.

“I never expected you either,” Will admits, gazing back at him with amazement. “You see me. All of me. You're the only one that's ever looked.”

“The only one that's ever looked properly, perhaps,” Hannibal considers. “You let me, Will,” he realizes with equal amazement.

“I never knew I wanted anyone to, until you,” Will points out, his breath coming a little short as the other man's thumb traces the curved outline of his lips.

“Neither did I,” Hannibal confesses, eyes fixed on his mouth until Will decides to put it to better use. “We are not unlike wolves in that way,” he continues, tilting his chin up as Will nuzzles the stubble just beneath his jaw. “Humans are the same, a pack animal, looking to belong to something greater than themselves.”

“We crave the same thing,” Will muses, pulling a groan from the other man as he scrapes his teeth lightly over his collar bone before sucking the flesh between his lips. When he's satisfied, he pulls back to admire his work, the first of it's series, the scarlet mark standing out in gorgeous contrast against his pale skin. Will hums contentedly, nestling his cheek into the cradle of his lover's shoulder.

“It's true,” Hannibal whispers down into his curls, lightly kissing the top of his head. “We share the same fundamental craving for companionship. It's this yearning deep within that compels us to seek the spiritual resonance within our own kind; to find a resemblance to define one's self by. In the grand scheme of the universe, our life spans flit by like little sparks, we are barely here before we're gone again, but on our own, each year can seem like an eon. In kinship there's solace. It serves to justify the effort."

“Speaking from personal experience, following that impulse has not exactly been too rewarding a pursuit,” Will admits sullenly, blindly trailing his fingers over the contours of Hannibal's back. “It's like having an O negative blood type. Kind of hampering when you can relate to anyone and no one can relate to you.”

“No one?” Hannibal asks him lightly, tugging Will back upright.

“Lot of years passed by before you rang the doorbell,” Will shrugs. “Like I said, I never expected you.”

“Were you lonely, Will?”

“Weren't you?”

If a tree falls in the woods and no one sees it, has it fallen? Will considers it's a matter of perspective really, but even the most solitary of hermits hopes his troglodytic scrawlings on the cave walls is someday seen before time flakes it away.

The dead haunt their legacy. Even unseen, their impression is lasting. Will has been in that cave and felt that keen agony of isolation; that driving, inner urge to be acknowledged, to prove that the tiny blip on the radar of existence was *him*.

He knows the fear of having never mattered. *He wants to have mattered to someone*.

Will knows exactly how it feels to be outside in the cold, pressing his face against the glass, looking in with longing at the warmth inside. He knows the harsh, acidic burn of envy; watching everyone else find *someone else*. He knows the constant agony of wanting to be seen but knowing that if he were to be, he'd be forced to avert his gaze. In his case, the saying's true: the eyes are the windows to the soul.

It's always been too easy to slip down that rabbit hole and every trip to wonderland incurs it's own new brand of damage, *poor Alice*.

It's like looking in a mirror, and he can always tell exactly what they are and what they think of him.

Are you *monster or man?* He asks.

The monster is always fascinated but at the end of every chase is a pit with a spiked bottom, and the lingering rot tends to taint the hallways. The others flow fluidly through his mind like water. If they leave no aftertaste, they're viable.

Only, if they get *too* close, they tend to see too much and the frightened tend to flee with predictable, dispiriting regularity.

People fear what they can't understand and he can't blame them. The monster he keeps has sharp teeth and sometimes festers a little too close to the surface. He's curbed his expectations to the extent that he could make due with almost anything with a pulse but he doesn't exactly have to.

He can play make believe. He can climb on stage and recite the lines, don a mask to hide the defect, pretend he's somebody else; somebody stable, somebody *safe*.

But in the end, it's always the same. He's deaf to the ovation: it's meaningless, his audience is in love with the actor; the acclaim is for his role, his costume, and it's a hollow consolation

they even bother to attend the performance.

Will despises the mask. There is nothing more suffocating than self-imposed sublimation; little more unbearable than the cancer of resentment. He knows what it's like to grow to despise the lackluster distractions he's duped into loving him, but he also, has always known, that were he to dispel the myth, were he to remove the mask, even the feeblest facsimile of kindness in any form would be out of his reach.

Will crushes shut his eyes against the sudden welling of unwanted tears, drawing in a sharp, shaky breath he's sure betrays him. As Hannibal's hand soothes a path down his back, he smothers a small, hiccup into his shoulder, inwardly cringing with shame and self-loathing when he feels the wet smear of his cheek against the other man's skin.

“I'm with you, Will,” Hannibal consoles, rocking him against his chest. “I'll always be here as long as you need me.”

No one was meant to see him. No one was equipped to. This man alone, proved able.

“*This is what symmetry is*,” he murmurs half to himself, but Hannibal's ears are sharp, and before he knows what's happened, the nest is turned upside down in it's branches. Will gasps in surprise as he's abruptly seized and wrenched backward. Held firmly away, Hannibal examines his face, his expression strange and eyes almost wild. Unnervingly shoved under the microscope, Will squirms uncomfortably, dismayed by the sudden exposure, but whatever he's being searched for is apparently found, judging by the brilliance of the other man's smile.

“*You've seen it, too*,” Hannibal exclaims, fingers digging bruises into his arms.

Utterly perplexed, Will blinks vacantly back at him.

“You've seen it,” Hannibal urges. “The parity.”

Will tenses at the sharp dig of the man's nails pressing hard enough into his skin to leave a temporary imprinting of crescent-moon shaped welts and wonders if he's trying to somehow convey his meaning through subcutaneous telepathy.

“The patterns are everywhere. It's in everything,” Hannibal explains.

For a moment, a shiver of fear shoots down Will's spine. *Patterns? Everywhere?*

He forgets the exact metabolic solubility of psilocybin, but in the off chance the man has happened to ingest any recently, he takes a quick, suspicious glance at his pupils. Almost immediately, Hannibal figures out what he's doing.

“I assure you, Will, I'm not high,” he informs him indignantly, retracting his claws.

“I believe you,” Will reassures, but Hannibal can smell a lie a mile away. There's a brief flash of hurt disappointment in his eyes and Will catches a fleeting glint of something volatile simmering just below the surface as well, but even though it passes quickly, he can still feel the echo of it's aftershocks in the tremor of Hannibal's hands clutching his shoulders.

“I believe you're assured I'm in no way impaired,” Hannibal confirms, “But you haven't the faintest idea what I'm talking about.”

“Patterns,” Will offers.

“In everything,” Hannibal repeats.

“Like, ionic equilibrium or something?” Will asks hesitantly.

Hannibal lights up with preemptive hope. “You're on the right track,” he replies. “In the dissection of anything in creation you see the building blocks of the universe.”

“There is a kind of symmetry to the vast distribution of stardust and atoms,” Will muses. “But it's hardly any sort of phenomena.”

“Of course this 'symmetry' is not unique to nature, however, in use as an analogy, is not only poignant, but remarkably singular,” Hannibal carefully explains. “In many ways, we are distinctly different men with distinctly different tastes and ideas, yet apart, inchoate. This is the sui generis unique to you and I.”

“And that the connection-”

“The *symmetry*,” Hannibal reminds Will, cutting him off; short of breath with impatient energy. “The synchronous ouroboros of fractals, bonded impermeably, revolving in their infinite, recursive loop, hidden until sought for. But, you've seen it, and once you do, you find it's everywhere, isn't it? Intricate in it's simplicity, beautiful in it's mystery. It's design etched into eternity.”

Will exhales a long, dazed breath as he's swept into the effusive tide of poetry that seems to just slide from his lover's tongue like liquid silk. The way the man can so simply twine such an inimitable profusion of emotion and eloquence into even the most hermeneutic of descriptions is so incredible it renders him temporarily speechless.

Hannibal searches him expectantly, awaiting any kind of sign of understanding—and Will wishes he could repay him with a response that's even half as articulate, but anything he could say would come off as fumbling and vulgar in comparison.

“Is this merely a pretty metaphor, or does this concept offer any practical applications?” he finally asks.

Intertwining their fingers, Hannibal smiles. “I hope so.”

“In case you had forgotten, you had mentioned a little while ago some intention to shower,” Will reminds him, summoning up his courage to get to the point. “You had suggested I join you?”

“It so happens I hadn't forgotten,” Hannibal replies, amused. “I am especially looking forward to the latter,” he reports, voice thick with desire. “If you would be so obliging.”

“Well, I'm certainly prepared for the occasion,” Will remarks, glancing down at himself pointedly before looking across at the other man's pants with disdain. “Stand up and strip.”

Hannibal sucks in a startled breath, his eyes shuttering and Will knows his heavy-handed command was appropriately conducted. He complies obediently, pushing himself off the bed and Will feels almost dizzy as his eyes follow the other man's hand to his fly where his arousal is fully evident, bulging almost obscenely under the stretched denim. He pulls down his pants, modestly averting Will's eyes before stepping out of them.

“Leave them,” he orders as Hannibal leans down, intending to pick them up.

Orderly as he is, he frowns down at them reluctantly but doesn't defy the command. It's a heady feeling to take control over such an otherwise intimidating force of authority but Will's pleased grin is gone before Hannibal's eyes return to his own, awaiting following instruction.

Will's mouth parches as he looks him down. Hannibal cock strains in front of him, curving up toward his navel with anticipation. Popping out almost completely from it's foreskin, Will notices the swollen head is the same dusky flush as the purpling bruise on his throat. He reminds himself to be patient. Look first. Touch later.

Will directs them to the bathroom and Hannibal follows quietly behind him.

After closing the door behind them, he waits patiently, clasping his hand politely in front of himself. There's a simmering heat in his eyes but his expression is otherwise placidly detached. Will stares back at him uncertainly.

“Well? Why don't you go ahead and start the shower,” Will suggests a little awkwardly.

Hannibal stares at him curiously. “Are you uncomfortable, Will?”

“A little,” he admits. “I was hoping you might be a bit more of an active participant.”

“In what way?”

“You know, by responding verbally from time to time, for a start.”

“I suspect by the way you've been ordering me around you may have been a little accidentally mislead by our prior conversation, however, I admit I was a little curious to see just how far we'd both be willing to take the experiment,” Hannibal smirks. “I like your confidence, Will, and I... you know I am willing to do everything in my capacity to please you, but I want you to be clear as to what this is.”

“What is it?”

“A step too far into dangerous territory.”

Will's eyes narrow. “How dangerous?”

Hannibal studies him. “That depends. Does the prospect excite you?”

“It's certainly compelling, but that depends on what's all entailed.”

“I'm sure you have some familiarity with certain aspects of this particular concept, at least in theory if not entirely in practice. There are ground rules, of course. Codes of conduct, preset parameters, etcetera. Implicit, unconditional trust is recommended, but just in case, a safe word is always advisable,” Hannibal explains.

Will feels his pulse accelerate.

“I feel however, that it's necessary for me to clarify something in advance before you get ahead of yourself, Will,” Hannibal warns. “If this is how you wish to proceed, I'd be willing to allow it, but you should be aware this was neither my intention, nor my desire.”

“What do you desire, Hannibal?”

“You,” he replies easily. “No details, no rules.”

“I like that idea,” Will agrees.

“I'm pleased you approve,” Hannibal grins as he slips around him toward the stall. After sliding back the shower door, he turns on the faucet, testing the water's temperature before stepping in.

Will takes a seat on the closed lid of the toilet as the small room fills up with steam and through the fogged over glass he watches the other man lather himself down, tugging his cock leisurely in one hand as he enjoys the show.

Finally, after another minute of waiting, Hannibal slides the door back open partway and peers down at him inquisitively. “Exactly how long do you expect me to put up with this?”

Will shrugs. “How long can you put up with it?” he counters.

“I suspect longer than you can, but don't take that as a challenge or I fear we'll be up far past sunrise,” he smirks before closing the door again. Will watches with astonishment as Hannibal pulls his hand down the length of his cock, biting the inside of his cheek as he hears his groan echo back to him from the other side of the glass and it's more than enough to persuade him, lest he draw blood. Stepping into the stream, he's met immediately with Hannibal's utterly unsurprised smirk.

“*Incubus*,” Will mutters.

“I'm inclined to take that as a compliment,” Hannibal grins, sweeping back the wet bangs from his forehead before glancing back at him with a hungry gleam in his eyes.

“I'm inclined to do a few other things to you than feed your enormous ego,” Will counters, wrapping his arms around Hannibal and pulling him against his chest.

“With so many promises, there better be some follow through,” his lover retorts, slotting together their hips. The wet slip of his cock against the other man's sends a shiver of pleasure down Will's spine.

“I intend to follow through,” Will warns, pushing Hannibal against the tiles. After capturing his mouth, and pinning both wrists against the wall, he thrusts forward, indulging himself in the slow, methodical torture of Hannibal's patience. Bucking up against him once more, pulls out from him a long, shuddering moan that shoots straight south and Will can't take it anymore. Pulling back just enough to slip his hand between them, he wraps his fingers around both of their cocks, aligning them against each other in his hand before closing his fist and steadying himself by placing the flat of his palm on the tiles just next to Hannibal's head. A moment later, Hannibal's hand joins over his own and as they pump themselves together, Will shakes with his mounting excitement. Then, too soon, Hannibal is removing his assistance and pushing him a step back.

“Stop,” he groans. “I can't take anymore. The refractory period will take awhile and I want you inside of me when I come.”

His explanation is so uncharacteristically, succinctly explicit, Will nearly shoots right then.

Balls aching, he nods dumbly and sags against the wall, gripping his dick tight at the base to thwart his premature orgasm from taking over, but when he reopens his eyes, he's met with the impossibly arousing sight of Hannibal with his head tilted back and eyes closed in concentration as he slips his slicked fingers inside of himself. Immobilized against the wall and slack jawed with desire, he hears himself whimper when he notices the unmistakable sign of pearly fluid leaking from the head of his lover's cock as he fucks himself slowly over his knuckles.

“Oh my God,” Will mutters. “Please say you're ready.”

Hannibal peers languidly back at him, the grin curling up his lips, lascivious and taunting. “If you are,” he replies.

Will pulls in a breath and tries to get himself under some kind of control, just barely managing it. “Out, now. Bed,” he orders brusquely.

Hannibal grabs a towel on his way out the door as Will rushes them toward the bed. “Are we not even going to dry off first?”

“No point,” Will grunts, practically pushing him down on the mattress before crawling atop, straddling his hips.

“Apparently, you don't care about sleeping on wet sheets,” Hannibal comments, evidently amused by Will's desperate state.

“Not going to matter when I'm done with you,” Will points out as he grinds together their hips dying for the friction.

Hannibal looks up at him curiously. “How do you want me?” he asks. “Would you prefer to take me from behind as I knelt up on my hands and knees, or would it be easier if I were laying down.”

“I want to see your face,” Will requests. “I want to see the way you look when I take you apart and make you mine.”

Hannibal gasps his approval of the idea, yanking Will down on top of him into a heated kiss.

When he pulls back he indicates toward the nightstand and Will glances over to see what he's wanting. Ah. The small tube sits right there, it's cap still half unscrewed.

Will climbs off and grabs it, before crawling up into a kneel before his lover. Hannibal gives him a warm, calming smile and opens his legs a little in anticipation as Will twists the cap off the rest of the way. After tossing it aside he looks down at the tube and hesitates, gulping nervously.

What's the protocol for this? Who's supposed to prepare whom? Is it a faux pas to even ask? Daring a glance down at Hannibal, he chews his lip nervously and holds out the tube.

“Um-”

Hannibal stares at him, stares at the tube and then stares back at him.

Finally, he's shows him some mercy and holds out his hand for the thing. “I'll do it myself for you this first time, but it's a courtesy to prepare your partner yourself.”

Will lunges forward and steals the tube back from his hand.

“Well if I'd known that, there wouldn't have been any confusion, would there?”

Hannibal drops his head back on his arms folded behind him and says nothing, gazing back at Will with a fond, approving smile as he watches him squirt out the lubricant.

Satisfied with just about a dime size dollop in the palm of his hand, he finds the cap and is just about to put it back on when he catches the other man's look of sudden consternation. “I sincerely hope you realize you'll need more than that.”

Will hears what he's politely not drawing attention to; that it's been awhile since he's last been bedded by a male partner.

“Are you nervous, Hannibal?” Will asks, smirking down at his lover.

“Not remotely, I have every faith in you, Will,” he replies nonchalantly, pumping himself indulgently in his fist a few times as Will pretty much squeezes the rest of the tube in his hands to no objection other than a muttered complaint that one of them will have to run out tomorrow to pick up another.

“It's not exactly rocket science,” Will chuckles nervously as Hannibal raises his knees to his chin and pulls apart his ass cheeks with either hand, presenting himself for preparation.

Will glances down, his ears burning hotly. The ring of his entrance clenches slightly just around the tip of his finger, but from Will's experience earlier and from watching Hannibal in the shower, he's sure he's doing fine. He pushes two more fingers in and is amazed by how

much easier this is to do for someone else. He can't help but imagine how wonderful Hannibal's slicked, tight heat will feel around his cock.

Experimentally curving his fingers a little, and giving a slight twist as he pushes in pulls out a moan from Hannibal neither had expected. Chest heaving, cock dripping and eyes dazed, his lover thrust back down on his hand and rocks back on the mattress.

"*Will, please*," Hannibal begs, wrecked with desperation, "I'm ready."

"Uh, condom?" Will asks hoarsely.

"No condom. I want to feel every detail of you inside of me. What it feels like when you fill me with your ejaculate," he stutters out breathless. "And afterward, let it leak from me all throughout the day tomorrow to remind me of what we are-"

"*For God's sake*, if you want all that, then you better stop telling me about it," Will huffs, barely holding it together.

Hannibal snags the pillow from beneath his head and scoots it under himself to give Will a better angle to push inside of him.

Edging up on his knees, Will leans his hips forward, lining the tip of his own weeping cock against his lover's entrance. He breaches through, just the very tip, and then suddenly, Hannibal thrusts down unexpectedly, enveloping him completely inside his exquisite heat. Will shakes with the sensation and unable to hold himself up like this, he collapses down on Hannibal.

His lover's arms snake around him and for awhile they kiss deeply as they together finding a steady rhythm.

And then, Hannibal's cock is shooting between them, landing in thick, hot ropes that sticks them together every time their hips slap together until Will is unloading deep inside of him, swallowed into the most powerful climax he's ever experienced. Wave after wave rolls through him until at last he's spent.

"That was..." Will's brain can't quite find the right words but Hannibal understands, planting a soft kiss on the corner of his lips. Pulling out and rolling off to the side of his lover, he nestles against him, wrapping his arm around his chest. "Intense," he decides finally. "Amazing and intense."

Hannibal grabs a fist full of their covers, tucking them around the two of them before cradling in back around him, and Will closes his eyes, burrowing into the cocoon of their combined warmth.

This is symmetry, is the last thing he thinks as drifts off to sleep.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Down on the veranda, looking over the plaza where the bustling market is stirring to life under the pleasant warmth of the early afternoon sun, two men share a small table, dining leisurely in the comfort of relative anonymity. It's a rare sort of privacy; the kind afforded by the low hum of the other patron's immersed in their own conversations and the soft din of clinking glasses and silver against china. Save for the peripheral reminder of the waitstaff popping around from time to time to refill their cups, everyone and everything else seems to fade into the backdrop.

It's as if they've happened into an invisible universe of only them and the experience is liberating. For a moment, they've found a semblance of normalcy. Hannibal rests back in his chair, humming contentedly as he sips his coffee. He glances up curiously, dragging a hand through his hair. It falls loosely back over his eyes afterward and Will marvels at how long he's let it grow, recalling a time when this man was the very essence of coiffed and polished. He couldn't be less so now and Will can't stop staring, drinking in the very sight of him.

This version of the man is almost unrecognizable; he's the picture of genuinely relaxed, from the neglect of stubble over his jaw to the unbuttoned neck of his shirt.

Studiously ignoring Hannibal's querying expression, Will finds his eyes drawn to the opened vee at his collar exposing just a glimpse of the light dusting of his chest hair. He flushes a little, remembering how downy it felt to the touch. When Hannibal catches his eyes again, Will can tell he's been caught red-handed. He spares him from comment, but his smile is amused—amused and a little *indecent;* laden with promise.

Will feels himself nervously crumpling his napkin and clears his throat, redirecting his attention to the busy plaza. “Any interest in perusing the wares?”

Hannibal chuckles softly. “Theirs or yours?”

Will chokes a little on his coffee, spilling a dribble down his chin. Blushing hotly, he wipes up the mess as quickly as possible and tries to regain his composure. Judging by Hannibal's expression, it's pretty much a lost cause.

“I wasn't anticipating such an overreaction,” he remarks, grinning over the lip of his mug.

“I'm glad you're so entertained,” Will retorts with mock indignation, buoyed by his companion's mirth.

“Not so much entertained as endlessly fascinated,” Hannibal muses. “Age cannot wither you, nor custom stale your infinite variety.”

Will shoos the idea away with a deflective wave of his hand. “I'll see your Shakespeare and raise you Nietzsche.”

“As you're so wont of late,” Hannibal sighs.

“*'At the bottom of every man knows well enough that he is a unique being, only once on this earth.'* It's not such a spectacular revelation to be told I'm unlike anyone else of your acquaintance, Hannibal.”

“It's a vast acquaintance,” he defends.

“If one considers the myriad of conditions you've encountered,” Will points out. “At a certain point, all those faces and names must sort of dissolve under the bold print of the DSM for you.”

“If I had ever been able to look at you through such a clinical lens it would have been an immense relief. My interest in you has never been conducive,” Hannibal admits.

Will shrugs. “Still, my point stands.”

Hannibal shakes his head with a small, exasperated smile. “ To finish your quote, *'by no extraordinary chance will such a marvelously picturesque piece of diversity in unity as he is, ever be put together a second time.'* ”

“I'm a rare specimen for the files, Doctor,” Will grins smugly. The grin falters when he notices Hannibal's expression; the sudden contemplative distance in his eyes.

“So rare as to defy definition. I could never quite figure out what it was about you, Will, yet from the moment we met, you stood out to me like a hyacinth on a hill top; a sort of distant memory blurred into mythos,” he muses, his eyes refocusing on Will with breathtaking intensity. “You are Hero holding out the torch and I am but Leander swimming across the Hellespont.”

Will studies the backs of his hands in his lap intently, humbled mute by the tight clench of elation in his chest at the novelty of the compliment.

There is a humility gained in the inevitable frost that comes each year to strip the petals from the flowers, but still the seasoned gardener toils, tilling the soil at the start of every season, laying new seed for spring. After the storms pass, the fruits of his labor are realized in the beauty of the new, unfurling blooms.

It's this very phoenixing hope that stirs alive inside of him as Hannibal reaches across the table, threading his fingers through his own.

Still, he fears the frost and pulls away.

Hannibal wisely abstains from voicing the question in his eyes and Will averts his gaze back to the table, wrapping his hands around his mug.

“Not that I'm complaining, but, you weren't supposed to get in for days,” Will remarks, pointedly changing the topic.

Hannibal shrugs. “Immediate entry was necessitated.”

“Turbulence amid flight?”

“From what I could ascertain, there would have been two plans,” Hannibal explains a little hesitantly. “An hour out from Punta Cana, plan A failed. You evaded the trap. Evidently, Plan B was to land me at a US naval base where I would be remanded back into custody. Naturally, I didn't care for that idea. I expressed my opinion on the matter and a small rearrangement among air traffic control later I landed on a small farm outside San Pedro.”

“You just abandoned the charter out on some farm?” Will asks, perplexed.

“Not just any farm,” Hannibal edifies. “Fortunately, my pilot knew of an old acquaintance still owing him a favor.”

“Cartel connections,” Will connects.

“It's been quite a persistent war the DEA has waged in the caribbean. And yet, through all that mess of dismantling and trade route sabotage, there are still traces of Sinoloa. Deep roots hold in Venezuela, and inland, South American border control is unsurprisingly lax.”

“Corruption prevails down the ranks in starving governments,” Will shrugs.

Hannibal wearily rubs the bridge of his nose. “Argentina happens to be better managed than it’s neighbors.”

“No time for immigration then,” Will surmises, the dawning realization planting itself in an uncomfortable knot in the pit of his gut.

Hannibal spares him a tired, unimpressed look.

“You can't reapply for a visa retroactively,” Will adds in a slightly panicky whisper, leaning forward over the table. “Or you'll have to think up some very inventive answers for how you got here. No papers means no validity.”

“It's a temporary inconvenience, but we can rely on yours for that in the time being.”

Will frowns. “But we can't stay here.”

“Not indefinitely,” Hannibal agrees. “However, Hector is within contact and he's currently residing in San Pedro—*on my dime*,” he adds for emphasis to ensure Will's clarity on the subject. “When we make new arrangements, his connections will pave the road.”

“The pilot?” Will asks.

“The pilot with friends in high places,” Hannibal corrects him, replacing his empty mug on the saucer.

“So your plan is to rely on a stranger,” Will muses dryly.

“Think Will. A stranger with criminal ties motivated by both my wallet and an incredibly transparent understanding of what I’m capable of. His options are narrow.”

“More reliable than family,” Will drawls. Hannibal doesn't bat an eye at the barb but his expression is tight in response. “I was glass half empty about this whole plan from the get go, but the glass smashed, Hannibal. You were a hair away from finding that bed empty last night. Sitting aboard the flight here, I had a good amount of time to keep at least one glass pretty full. Check your credit card receipts in a day or two, I think you'll see what I mean.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes, studying Will closely. “Do you mean to tell me that you encountered some sort of obstacle on your end?”

Will snorts. “No, everything went just swimmingly. I mean there was the little mishap with the authorities waiting right at the gate for my plane to land to take me into custody, but I doubt that's worthwhile enough to bring up.”

By the brief flash of rage in his companion's eyes, Will can see he's made his point.

“I wasn't aware,” Hannibal informs him tightly.

“Nothing you could have done,” Will shrugs. “At the time. But it was perhaps something that could have been avoided had you considered the plethora of other options.”

“You and I both know there were no other feasible options. I own up to my mistakes, Will,” Hannibal finally capitulates. “The entire situation was-”

“*Unfortunate*?” Will cuts in scathingly.

“Dealt with,” Hannibal returns.

“You trusted her.”

“A mistake I seem to be prone to,” he retorts, with a sharp, cautioning look at Will. “One in particular that won't be made again.”

Will shakes his head in amazement. He'd been right in the first place to suspect Chiyoh's involvement. And the fact that he'd given her the benefit of the doubt is galling. They pause their discussion as a waiter stops by to ask if they need anything else.

“*Voy a tener una lillet con la naranja, por favor*,” Hannibal orders distractedly.

“Uh, add an Alhambra on the ticket for me,” Will adds quickly.

After the waiter leaves, Will shoots Hannibal an angry look. “She wanted to replace me.”

Hannibal's frown disagrees. “Her aim was nobler,” he corrects. “There is a great burden of guilt she shouldered. She gained liberty at the cost of her conscience and she was it's prisoner.”

“As she has always been your prisoner,” Will points out.

“She thought she could save you,” Hannibal continues, ignoring the accusation.

“So she tried to separate us.”

“If her first plan had succeeded and you'd been captured, she would have let me go all the way to Buenos Aires, adhering to the original plan.”

“It would have given her ample time to hide before you could pin it back on her,” Will pieces together. “But then, when her attempt to sic the troops on me failed, without the distraction of sorting through the matter, she knew her days were numbered. So she tried to have you captured instead.”

“You've drawn the wrong conclusion. This is a woman whose sense of self-preservation is not in excess of her sense of honor. Although misguided, her attempt was well intentioned. She knew the potential price she might pay. She made a sacrifice for you. You owe Chiyoh your respect,” Hannibal insists.

Up until this instance, Will realizes they've been speaking of her in the past tense. “You collected what was due,” he conjectures.

“I didn’t have to,” Hannibal tells him, watching him with a dark expression. “She impaled herself on her own blade.”

Supuku. Fitting in an incredibly unsettling, dysfunctional way. It’s not a coward’s end. It’s slow. It’s horrifically painful, and exactly the method that would suit to recompense the grave sin she’d committed against her master.

'You owe Chiyoh your respect.' The advisement sticks and although he can't help feel a small stab of guilt, he knows it's wiser to bury it deep before it can further fester. “Her convenience blinded you to her motives,” Will points out.

“Love is often blind,” Hannibal sighs resignedly as the waiter returns with their drinks. Lifting the glass level with his eyes he plucks out the orange rind and gives the glass a short twist, watching the liquid swirl against the frosted glass.

“Your love is lethal,” Will remarks taking a pull of his beer straight from the bottle.

Hannibal smiles at him thoughtfully. “Often.”

And yet, somehow, after everything, he's still six-feet up. “Do you regret it?” Will asks him finally, desperately curious of his response.

Hannibal breathes out through his nose, his expression grim. “Regret is love’s greatest defect.”

“Do you regret loving?” *Do you regret loving me?*

Will sucks in a breath as his companion's piercing gaze latches onto him, glinting with fire. “Not love itself, but its arrears.” He takes another sip of his drink, collecting himself. “As for your prior question, Will, I will never regret protecting what belongs to me.”

“Chiyoh belonged to you,” Will can't help but point out, although in immediate retrospect, he wish he'd done so with less jealousy lacing his tone.

Hannibal looks at him evenly over the rim of his glass. “She did,” he admits simply and cleanly, taking a long sip before setting down his cocktail.

You loved her and she betrayed you.

“Rules have their exceptions,” Hannibal explains, as if reading his mind to answer the question sitting on the edge of that thought.

“You called her actions noble, and yet still, you showed no mercy,” Will muses.

Hannibal looks at him sharply. “I afforded her enough exemptions. However, trying to take you from me was an inexcusable transgression. You may recall this from personal experience.”

Note taken. Will knows when to let sleeping dogs lie and rests the subject.

“Where do we go from here?” he asks as Hannibal finishes his drink just after he downs the rest of his own.

“I've given some thought to the Balkans.”

“That's not what I meant,” Will grins. “Do you want to join me down in the market?”

“Of course,” Hannibal replies, flagging the waiter for their check.

The young man returns shortly book in tow and Hannibal pulls out an indiscernible number of colorful bills to hand back to him. “*Ningún cambio*.”

“*Muchas gracias, señor*,” The waiter thanks, ducking his head before whisking away after bussing the table of their used dishes and glassware.

The plaza is a swarming commotion buzzing with all types of energy: vendors haggling prices and small children chasing each other around the legs of their harried mothers, enthusiastic tourists agog at the exotic fruits in the bins and determined merchants barrelling through with their carts. As they navigate their way down the aisles of makeshift stalls pushing through the tight throng, Hannibal reaches down and grasps his hand and Will can't help a slightly embarrassed flush of excitement at the intimacy. Though rationally, it makes sense to form some kind of a link to keep from getting separated, there is still the clear indicator of what it conveys to others—if they notice.

If they notice, they'd see two clearly unrelated, adult men holding hands. A shock of fear striked through him, and in a moment of latent, internalized homophobia, the kind so ingrained he'd almost forgotten it was even there, Will nearly yanks his back his hand.

Anxious, he scours the faces around them, hunting for sneers of disgust, ill-natured jibes in their direction, anything to give credence to his sudden bout of paranoia. From what he can tell through the thick crowd, they're either undetected or ignored, but it still doesn't tamp his self-conscious fear.

Almost as if he can sense Will's reticence radiating through their hands, without looking behind him, Hannibal rearranges to interlock their fingers, squeezing his hand tightly for reassurance. But, there's something also fiercely possessive in the gesture; something that shouts to Will that he's not allowed to hide from this—to hide what they are from anyone, *devil be damned*. His heart lurches in his chest as he's flooded with a strange, satisfying thrill in response he hadn't expected. He likes it, he realizes, both the rebellious antagonism and the warm feeling of belonging.

Hannibal escorts him up to a stall to inspect the wares, releasing his hand to accept the item he's interested in from the vendor. Unable to nudge around him, Will tries to peer over his shoulder instead. He makes little progress in his attempt before Hannibal spins around with a self-pleased smile, grabbing his arm.

“What do you think of this?” he asks manhandling a bracelet around Will's wrist before he can pull away in alarm. He gets the clasp latched with determined expedience before he can manage to do just that.

Will stares at the jewelry uncomprehending.

“I think it suits you perfectly,” Hannibal decides.

Will glances around his companion at the face of the happy vendor depositing a thick wad of cash into her drawer and then back down to his wrist. The links are heavy enough to remind him of their presence but comfortable and the item itself is sort of elegant in a way that isn't to his taste but certainly suits Hannibal's.

Between two silver bands are two touching gold bands and the obvious symbolism isn't lost on him. He not exactly one for ornamentation but he knows enough about the craft to know what markers to look for to confirm it isn't some shitty alloy knock-off and he also knows Hannibal well enough to know he wouldn't be putting some shitty alloy knock-off on his wrist in the first place.

He wants to say it's too much—he can't accept it, but the words die on his tongue as he observes his lover's nearly ecstatic satisfaction as he admires it on him, his eyes sparkling with delight.

“Hannibal,” he starts uncertainly, “What is this supposed to be?”

“A reminder,” he replies evenly.

A reminder, Will muses to himself. *It's a pretty shackle.*

Chapter End Notes

1.) Hannibal orders a Lillet with orange. that's a canon drink of his fyi.
2.) The hyacinth on the hill top is a nod to the ancient Greek myth of the homosexual romance between Apollo and Hyacinth.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

However spontaneous the gesture, however quick the gift's selection, Will suspects there had to be a level of precalculation involved. It's true motive is too bold to be mistaken for sentiment. This is not generosity: it's greed. A conspicuous advertisement of claim.

Will swallows thickly as he absorbs the fact, measuring Hannibal's expression.

His smile is far from innocuous.

"*A reminder,*" Will echoes softly back to himself as he stares down at the addition to his wrist. The finely polished links suffused with the heat of the summer sun sparkle as brilliantly back at him as Hannibal's eyes—eyes Will can't help but flush under the expectant intensity of. In their depths, there is a dare wrapped inside a demand.

Hannibal is a remote strategist. He rigs the game in advance well before ever agreeing to play. That's the way he's always operated. He works behind the scenes. He arranges the set, choreographing the players on the stage to his liking.

This time, he's engineered Will the advantage. All things considered, it's actually very generous. Surprisingly so. Moreover, it levels the playing field.

"It's nice," Will says finally.

Hannibal's chest puffs a little at his approval, but his sense of victory is a tentative thing. He's uncertain. The remark was vague, Will is reliably unpredictable and he can tell Hannibal isn't quite satisfied.

"Do you mean the piece itself?"

Will holds the bracelet up to his inspection, feigning a concentrated interest in its craftsmanship.

"Not exactly an expert, but it certainly looks well made," he remarks, as if carelessly stripping the thing down of all it's affixed symbolism.

"I'm pleased it's met your exacting standards," Hannibal replies drolly. Will grins to himself as he hears the note of disappointment tucked neatly inside his sarcasm. "Shall we move along?" He suggests, offering Will his arm.

Companionably linked, they stroll down the row of stalls, occasionally pretending brief notice of the wares.

"I didn't mean to imply you'd select anything inferior," Will amends after awhile.

“You'll wear it?” Hannibal asks guardedly.

Will shrugs. It's a quick thing but he doesn't mean it dismissively. “I said I liked it,” he replies blandly as Hannibal fixes him under his shrewd, assessing gaze.

“You said it was nice. Not that you liked it,” he points out.

“I like it.”

“So you believe it will serve its purpose effectively?”

“You mean will it serve as a sufficient mnemonic device?” Will snorts softly and grins. “I suppose if the eventual sensory conditioning of hypomnesis doesn't diminish its efforts. Then of course, there are always the conductive properties. Those crash-course remedial lessons in the laws of thermodynamics when you've fallen asleep in the sun and you wake up branded.”

“That's happened I take it.”

“Top of my belt buckle against my stomach. Blistered like a bitch.”

“Fine metals have an induction tolerance for higher temperatures,” Hannibal assures him fingering along the rim of a large wooden bowl.

“You know. I see the thinly veiled insult, Hannibal,” Will warns him teasingly. “I don't know what's convinced you my memory is equivalent to that of a goldfish.”

Hannibal pauses in his perusal, turning back to him with a small, affronted frown. “Tell me, my dear boy, is your gratitude always laced with arsenic, or do you save it only for me?”

“Don't psychoanalyze me,” Will warns, wagging his finger.

“I won't like you when your psychoanalyzed. Or so I've been told,” Hannibal sighs.

“You don't have to buy my-” Will stops himself short. “You don't have to buy me anything, Hannibal.”

“I don't,” he agrees.

“That includes my loyalty. I don't have to be reminded of it. Or of you. I'm not unintentionally obtuse.”

Hannibal cocks his head at him thoughtfully. “I have never once doubted your intelligence,” he defends. “However, your reluctance insinuated I'd broached the topic prematurely. I never intended to make you uncomfortable, Will.” There is the smallest hint of hurt in his expression that guts Will just to see. “I didn't think you'd find the idea so repugnant.”

“That's melodramatic,” Will exclaims, gaping at his companion incredulously. “I can assure you I don't find the idea of sharing a future with you 'repugnant'. I thought that would be fairly evident without beating the thing to death with a stick. But, you have to admit, there is something a little insecure about *this,*” he points out, holding up the bracelet on his wrist.

“Is a wedding ring so different?” Hannibal asks.

Will plucks the string of a mandolin in passing and considers the question.

“No. It's not,” he eventually admits. “But the whole thing is trenched in archaism. If you want me, I'm yours. We don't need to sign papers.”

“I wasn't asking you to marry me,” Hannibal chuckles. “And I won't unless you want me to. Do you want me to make an honest man of you, Will?”

Will blushes. He knows he's only half-joking, but the sudden punch of arousal that shocks through him at the idea catches him by surprise, and distracted, he stumbles in his footing. Hannibal catches him around the waist but doesn't remove his arm after Will finds his balance.

Embarrassed, he trains his gaze forward and prays Hannibal won't remark on it. Still, out of the corner of his eye, much to his chagrin, the other man's expression is straining with barely contained amusement.

“No,” Will warns him.

“Truly. *She doth protest*-”

“Shut it,” Will interjects glaring ahead irately.

“I adore you,” Hannibal laughs, tugging Will close against his hip and tightening his grip.

As they push through the crowd, eventually Will spots a stall that catches his eye.

"Wait a minute," he orders Hannibal. "Don't look."

Pulling out his wallet, he pushes a wad of cash into the vendor's hand.

"I don't know shit about jewelry," Will explains pushing the bracelet over Hannibal's fist.

His lover stares at the little colorful beads without any hint of amusement. It's ugly as sin but by the way Hannibal is looking at it like its the most precious thing in the universe, and then looks at Will the same, he knows he's made the right choice.

The future ahead is unknown. But whatever it holds, Will knows he's ready.

Home is not a place, it's a person. An imperfect, wonderful and sometimes terrifying person.

And Will loves him.

Chapter End Notes

Done for now, but remember, this is now a series. There will be a final part. I just have to find the time. (So, heads up, you might want to subscribe if you haven't already.)

Hope you enjoyed. Comments are my motherfrikkin breadcrumbs, guys.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!